

## Message for Yom Kippur

Today being Yom Kippur - the Day of Atonement - Rabbonim around the world will be speaking all about God's forgiveness. Indeed, this is a vital and important topic because most of us, at least from time to time, need reassurance on this matter. After all, our perceptions of God are by and large framed as a result of our interaction with the world around us, and are necessarily limited by our experiences in life. The child who grows up, for instance, without parental love and affection, only experiencing harsh discipline may find it difficult as an adult to relate to the concept of a loving, forgiving God. Through no fault of their own he or she may only be capable of seeing God, as his or her parents were, as a cold disciplinarian whose judgement and anger must constantly be placated by perfect behaviour or doctrine. Indeed, they would find no lack of Scriptures to reinforce their perspective, for from the beginning we encounter portraits of an angry God who, for example, floods the world and thereby kills everyone, destroys cities with fire from heaven, commands the destruction of whole peoples, or demands the burning or stoning of individuals for such heinous crimes as picking up sticks on Shabbat! In fact throughout the Tanakh and right on into the Messianic Writings we find similar portraits of God as a judgemental ≠ angry deity, with The Revelation concluding the canon with visions of a lake of fire in which those who fall foul of His temper are to apparently suffer for all eternity. This is frightening stuff, especially for those whose hold on God's love and forgiveness is, through to no fault of their own, a little tenuous! In fact, in many ways, for those so affected, this day of Yom Kippur may reinforce the view of God as being angry and judgemental. After all, the rites prescribed in ancient times for this day are particularly violent. Vayikra 16, for instance, in which these rites are primarily detailed, are framed within the context of the recent incineration of Aharon's two sons, Nadav and Avihu. Hardly an encouraging start to the Day! The small matter of how to avoid dying in like manner is in fact the rationale behind the rites. As we read, "Tell you brother Aharon not to come at just any time into the Holy Place beyond the curtain, in front of the ark-cover which is on the ark, so that he will not die; because I appear in the cloud over the ark-cover." Not just here, but in many other passages of Scripture God appears to be particularly angry and trigger happy. Thus Moshe is banned from the Land for striking instead of speaking to the rock and is warned by God that he actually got off lightly. Indeed, he did! By way of contrast poor old well-meaning Uzzah put out his hand to steady the Ark of the Covenant in order prevent it from crashing to the floor, only to be killed by God in His apparent anger, with him dying right then and there in front of the gathered people. Little wonder that everyone was afraid after that! Similarly King David sinned by having Uriah murdered and by committing adultery with his wife. And yet this picture of an angry, even vindictive God isn't helped but the fact that it wasn't David that was punished for this crime. Instead God killed David's innocent baby son! In the Messianic Writings too Hannayah and Shappirah were struck dead by the divine hand for pretending that the money that they had given to support the poor had been all that they had received from the sale of their property. I could go on....

Throughout the Scriptures then we have portrait after portrait of an angry, judgemental, trigger-happy, even, so some might say, vindictive God. Ample reason, they might further

## Message for Yom Kippur

say, to be especially afraid on this Day of Judgement! Reflecting this climate of fear we are informed that the High Priest in days of old would enter the Holy of Holies with a rope attached to his foot, so that he might be hauled out if something went wrong and God killed him! To this extent we are to be thankful, I suppose, that the rites of Yom Kippur (as detailed in Vayikra 16) allowed for the possibility that human beings might dodge the divine bullet - if, and only if, the rites were carried out perfectly according to instruction. In which case God's anger would be taken out on innocent animals instead. As we read, "He is to take from the community of the people of Israel two male goats for a sin offering and one ram for a burnt offering.... He is to slaughter the bull of the sin offering which is for himself.... Next he is to slaughter the goat of the sin offering which is for the people.... When he has finished atoning for the Holy Place, the tent of meeting and the altar, he is to present the live goat. Aharon is to lay both his hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the transgressions, crimes and sins of the people of Israel; he is to put them on the head of the goat and then send it away into the desert with a man appointed for the purpose. The goat will bear all their transgressions away to some isolated place, and he is to let the goat go in the desert." That's a lot of slaughtering of innocent animals going on, don't you think, and all so that the guilty humans could dodge the divine bullet! Indeed, if nothing else made the ancient Israelite feel thoroughly guilty on this day then perhaps the thought that these blameless animals had died in your place would do so. In fact some might say that feeling bad appears to have been the very purpose of this day. For as we read, "It is to be a permanent regulation for you that on the tenth day of the seventh month you are to deny [or afflict] yourselves..." The traditional understanding of this verse has been that in order to be forgiven we must participate in a complete communal fast for 25 hours from both food and water. For those required to conduct the services and who must therefore talk or sing all day long the fast is particularly hard to bear without any water. At the end of Yom Kippur my mouth feels bruised and sensitive. But for many Jews in our history the affliction of the fast wasn't enough so, seeking to head off or deflect divine anger they took to flagellation. During the Middle Ages, the practice of self-flagellation became commonplace on the day before Yom Kippur both in Europe and in the Arab world. Jewish men would use whips, often inscribed with biblical passages such as "it shall be a holy convocation unto you; and ye shall afflict your souls" (Leviticus 23:27) – and would whip their own backs, usually 39 times. The thought seems to be that the more you afflicted yourself the more God's anger would be satiated.

In truth, there is little of this portrait of God that is attractive or enticing - at least to us as 21st Century people. Even if the end result of all of this was God's forgiveness one might still rightfully ask whether such a God was worth having a relationship with? To put it bluntly He doesn't sound very nice! But thankfully this isn't all that the Scriptures have to say about God. There are, by way of contrast, very many portraits of God which offer a different perspective to the one that I have just sketched out. The idea that God is, above else, loving, merciful and always forgiving is one that also finds frequent repetition. Ironically, since we have already considered S'dom as evidence that God is naturally disposed to anger and judgement, it must also be noted that the account also provides evidence to the alternative. For here we

## Message for Yom Kippur

also find God actually promising Avraham that if he found ten righteous in the city he would not destroy it but would instead “forgive the whole place for their sake.” Did you get that? “Forgive the whole place!” What an incredible statement! The reported magnanimity of God in this situation, that He was willing to forgive those who had sinned, even though they had not even asked for His forgiveness, is astounding here, especially in view of the stated crimes of the city. Indeed, I believe that the story is narrated as it is so as to demonstrate God’s eagerness to forgive the sinner. Rather than reading the story as one that illustrates God’s trigger-happy anger, in which case God would surely not have taken the time to consult Avraham, it should perhaps be alternatively read as one in which Avraham’s morality is being tested; in other words, having stated His course of action, God actually wanted Avraham to argue with Him and thus dissuade Him. Though in the course of the narrative Avraham questions God’s morality, “shall not the judge of the earth do right?” it is actually Avraham’s morality that is being put on test. Would the patriarch be an accomplice to a crime? Thankfully in challenging God Avraham passed the test! In Bmidbar 14 we further read the wonderful statement that, ‘Adonai is slow to anger, rich in grace, forgiving offences and crimes; yet not exonerating the guilty, but causing the negative effects of the parents’ offences to be experienced by their children and even by the third and fourth generations.’” Moshe then asked Hashem: “Please! Forgive the offence of this people according to the greatness of your grace, just as you have borne with this people from Egypt until now.” Adonai answered, “I have forgiven, as you have asked.” Really? That was it? God forgave just like that, with no further questions asked and no sacrifices required? To some this is an oddity, but time and time again throughout the Tanakh God is reputed to simply forgive without further ado, even without sacrifice! While it is true that this same promise of forgiveness is found in relation to the sacrifices throughout the Torah, it is well to consider that it wasn’t so much because of the killing of an animal or the shedding of its blood that prompted Hashem to forgive our people their offences, but because of His oft-stated all-forgiving nature. In the case of the sacrifices these were simply evidential proof of the change of heart of the offerer in a way that ancient peoples could understand. In fact, as the author to the Messianic Jews not only confirms, “it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins,” but as King David wrote in Tehillim 51, “You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.”

Time and time again throughout the Torah, Tanakh and Messianic Writings we are therefore provided with portraits of a God who simply forgives, does not bear grudges and who does not delight in the destruction of the innocent or even of the wicked. To this effect, and in order to drive home his message about the goodness, mercy and kindness of God, Yeshua told the story of the Prodigal Son. According to the story an exceedingly ungrateful, entitled and unloving son first effectively wished his father dead so that he could acquire his legacy early, and then upon leaving the family home with his father’s cash in hand he proceeded to squander it on wine and women. The son’s actions are unquestionably reprehensible, leading us to feel antipathy toward him. And yet the account of the father’s response to his son’s

## Message for Yom Kippur

return is wonderfully instructive as to the attitude of God towards us - as Yeshua intended. As we read, "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity. He ran and threw his arms around him and kissed him warmly. His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against Heaven and against you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son — ' but his father said to his slaves, 'Quick, bring out a robe, the best one, and put it on him; and put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet; and bring the calf that has been fattened up, and kill it. Let's eat and have a celebration! For this son of mine was dead, but now he's alive again! He was lost, but now he has been found!' And they began celebrating." There we have it. Just like that! Forgiven! The father welcomed the prodigal son back with open arms and without any form of recrimination. There was no fatherly finger wagging, and the father did not let the situation drag on as Yosef did with his brothers, playing with them, pushing them to the edge, to get them to beg for forgiveness. To the contrary, in the story of the Prodigal Son there is no place for fatherly judgement or anger; there is instead just an unequivocal and heartfelt welcome. In fact, as we read, "while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity." Of course the son was remorseful, pleading to be allowed back home as a mere servant, "but" - and let us note the strategic placement of this word in the text - the father cut short his son's self abasement and ordered instead that he be dressed instead in the best robe, to have a ring put on his finger and shoes put on his bare feet. And that, Yeshua said, is how God regards and responds to us when we similarly turn back. His portrait of God is not trigger happy, judgemental and angry but ever merciful, forgiving and kind. As indeed Yeshua also taught elsewhere, God is not expecting perfection from us before He forgives us but a simple desire to live fruitfully to the benefit of others - loving our neighbour as ourselves. To this effect we read in Luke 19 that "Yeshua entered Yericho and was passing through, when a man named Zakkai appeared who was a chief tax-collector and a wealthy man. He was trying to see who Yeshua was; but, being short, he couldn't, because of the crowd. So he ran on ahead and climbed a fig tree in order to see him, for Yeshua was about to pass that way. When he came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zakkai! Hurry! Come down, because I have to stay at your house today!" He climbed down as fast as he could and welcomed Yeshua joyfully. Everyone who saw it began muttering, "He has gone to be the house-guest of a sinner." But Zakkai stood there and said to the Lord, "Here, Lord, I am giving half of all I own to the poor; and if I have cheated anyone, I will pay him back four times as much." Yeshua said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, inasmuch as this man too is a son of Avraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost."

See how organically Zaccheus' rehabilitation took place? At the very first sign of his change of heart, before he had yet done anything apart from make promises of restitution, Zaccheus was forgiven and 'salvation' came to his house. Similarly, when some men lowered their paralysed friend into his midst we read that Yeshua told him: "Courage, son! Your sins are forgiven." These and other Scriptural portraits indicate to us that God's default state is not trigger-happy anger, violence and destruction, but rather love, mercy, forgiveness and

## Message for Yom Kippur

compassion. It can be so hard to really take hold of and allow this perspective to penetrate one's consciousness when all you know of love, mercy, forgiveness and compassion is of the patchy, oft-withheld or refused, imperfect human kind. Indeed, from that perspective such perfect divine love appears to be too good to be true. Our experience of humanity naturally inclines us toward some degree of unbelief or cynicism. There must be, so we think, a catch. At the back of our minds we reason that God must have limits to His tolerance, patience, love and forgiveness, because even the best people we know are limited in these respects. And yet to think so is to remake God in our own imperfect image. It is our task as pilgrims along life's journey to challenge these limits within ourselves and thus allow God's goodness to expand our hearts and minds so that we may become more like Him in our showing mercy, compassion and forgiveness. As Yeshua said, "You have heard that our fathers were told, 'Love your neighbour — and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! Then you will become children of your Father in heaven. For he makes his sun shine on good and bad people alike, and he sends rain to the righteous and the unrighteous alike. What reward do you get if you love only those who love you? Why, even tax-collectors do that! And if you are friendly only to your friends, are you doing anything out of the ordinary? Even the Goyim do that! Therefore, be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect."