



Thoughts on Yom Kippur

by Rabbi Bernie Fox



This week's Thoughts sponsored with love by Rabbi Chaim and Sara Weiss and Yael, Esti, Eli and Benji in honor of Rabbi David and Tzippy Twersky making aliya! May the words of Moshe Rabbeinu guide you upon your entering the Land of Israel. We will miss you greatly!

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When September 11 Precedes Yom Kippur¹

1. From where are personal values derived?

How do we develop values? Are our personal values a consequence of our education and our culture? Are there other factors that influence the emergence of an individual's personal ethical standards and moral priorities?

And He said to Avram: Know that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs. They will subjugate them and afflict them for four hundred years. And I will also judge the nation that they will serve. Afterwards, they will go forth with abundant possessions.
(Sefer Beresheit 15:13-14)

2. The mystery of Bnai Yisrael's suffering in Egypt

In order to respond to this question, let us consider a difficult set of passages in the Torah. The above passages are a portion of a prophecy of Avraham. In this prophecy Hashem reveals to Avraham that his descendants will develop into a great nation. He also reveals to Avraham that the journey of his descendants will include travails, terrible suffering, and persecution. They will experience four hundred years of exile. During their exile, they will be subjected to servitude. They will become the slaves of the citizens of their host country. Their masters will persecute and afflict them. Only after this period of intense suffering will they emerge as a nation with its own land and home.

Later in the Torah this prophecy is fulfilled. Avraham's descendants become residents of Egypt. There they are subjugated and made slaves. They are persecuted and even murdered. Only after enduring centuries of suffering are Avraham's descendants redeemed from Egypt and transformed into the nation of Bnai Yisrael.

The Torah does not provide an explanation for this persecution. Why was it deserved? If it was not the result of some terrible sin but the result of necessity, then what was that necessity?

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik Zt'l suggests that the context of this prophecy of persecution suggests

¹ The following is based upon a program conducted with NYHS students on 9/11/2013. A video of this program can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mAEZMguRnbU>.

at least a partial explanation for it. Hashem is revealing to Avraham that his descendants will develop into a great nation. It is in this context that He tells Avraham about the suffering that is the destiny of his progeny. This context suggests that this terrible suffering was somehow fundamental to the nation-building process of Bnai Yisrael. Why was it essential?

3. The impact of a personal encounter with evil

Although we can develop an understanding of good and evil through an intellectual process, this process will not necessarily result in our own personal commitment to the good. The absolute commitment to a life of virtue often requires personal exposure to the opposite – exposure to intense evil. Exposure to evil transforms our intellectual concept of virtue into a meaningful personal ethic. Through this exposure one more vividly appreciates the immense destructive power of evil and hatred.

Rav Soloveitchik explains that the destiny that Hashem revealed to Avraham was not merely that his descendants would form a nation. Their destiny was to become a nation that would embody their forefather's values and ethics. They would teach to humanity Avraham's message of compassion and kindness. They would reject the mindless life of pagan hedonism and adopt a lifestyle committed to ethical treatment of others, pursuit of knowledge, and service to Hashem.

Certainly, Avraham would transmit his values and outlook to his descendants. They would be educated in the religion of Avraham. But would they share Avraham's commitment to these values and this outlook? How could a nation be formed that would fully commit itself to Avraham's revolutionary values? The Egypt experience helped assure this outcome.

Egypt was a laboratory of evil. However, Avraham's descendants were not passive observers of these demonstrations of humanity's capacity for evil. They were the subjects and victims of the demonstrations. In Egypt, Avraham's descendants came to understand the ethical degeneracy that is the product of the hedonist's decadence. They fully grasped the capacity of humankind to inflict terrible suffering upon one another. They comprehended the sinister power of hatred. They came to completely recognize the impact of the dehumanization of others and the malevolent behavior that this dehumanization evokes and promotes.

These lessons were designed to inspire Bnai Yisrael to be a different type of nation. They would be a people who would embrace and promote compassion for others. They would protect those who are poor or alone. They would welcome and sustain strangers. They would reject the decadence of pagan hedonism and replace it with a life devoted to the highest values. They would adopt and embrace as a national identity the values Avraham would transmit.²

4. 9/11 and the lessons learned from horror

Rav Soloveitchik's analysis suggests that we can learn from even the most dreadful personal experiences. Lessons of fundamental importance were powerfully communicated by the horror of the Egypt experiences. The encounter with intense evil can be the most effective means of communicating the value of virtue. From this perspective, the tragedy of human suffering can be moderated if we learn from the suffering. The tragedy of suffering is compounded if its lessons are unheard or unheeded.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 are one of the worst horrors that most of us have experienced. But there is a lesson that is communicated by the immensity of that tragedy. In order to identify that message, we will turn to Yom Kippur.

And Yona arose and he fled to Tarshish from before Hashem. He went to Yaffo and he found a ship that had arrived from Tarshish. He paid its fare and boarded the ship to travel with them to Tarshish from before Hashem. (Sefer Yona 1:3)

5. The story of Yona and his perspective

On the afternoon of Yom Kippur we read the Book of Yona. The book tells the story of the prophet Yona. Yona was commanded to travel to Ninveh, to rebuke its citizens, and warn them of their approaching doom. He was instructed to inform them that their repentance would save them. Doom and disaster would be avoided.

² Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, *Yemai Zikaron* (Jerusalem, 1986), pp. 92-97.

In the above passage, Yona rejects this mission and attempts to flee from before Hashem. He fails to escape. He reluctantly undertakes the mission that he abhorred. He preaches to the citizens of Ninveh and pleads with them to repent. They respond to Yona's message. They change their lives and reshape their destiny.

The text does not provide an explanation for Yona's resistance to Hashem's directive. The commentators offer a number of possibilities. Malbim explains that Ninveh was a great metropolis in the country of Ashur. Ashur was Israel's enemy. Yona feared that some time soon Ashur would march its armies against Israel. He concluded that saving Ninveh and Ashur would contribute to the destruction of his own people. Israel could be saved or at least preserved longer if Ashur would be destroyed. Yona made the decision to allow Ninveh to be destroyed for its sins rather than facilitate the misery and suffering of his own people.³

Yona was successful in saving Ninveh. However, he did not celebrate his success. Instead, he intensely mourned the approaching tragedy that he had facilitated.

Should I not have compassion for Ninveh – the great city? In it are more than one hundred twelve thousand people who do not know their right from left and much livestock. (Sefer Yona 4:11)

6. Hashem's response to Yona: the sacredness of human life

Hashem again spoke to Yona. The above passage is the final words of Hashem's message. Hashem taught Yona the importance of every human being. Jew and non-Jew are created in the divine image. Hashem's love extends to all of His creations. Yona does not have the right to place the interests of Bnai Yisrael above the mission of saving the people of Ninveh.

What is the relevance of this reading to Yom Kippur? Rav Soloveitchik explains that throughout Yom Kippur we pray for personal salvation. We petition Hashem to spare our families, our communities, and our nation. However, on Yom Kippur all of humanity is judged. The fate of every human being – Jew and non-Jew – is decided. The reading admonishes us to not make Yona's mistake. We should not become so absorbed in our prayers for ourselves that we forget to have compassion for others. We review the lesson that Hashem taught to Yona, and through him, to us. Every human soul is precious. Every human being is fashioned in the Divine image.⁴

The horror of 9/11 is a powerful illustration of the impact of forgetting this lesson. How were intelligent, educated individuals capable of destroying so many innocent lives? Where was their compassion for the small children sitting in the seats of airliners that they transformed into lethal missiles? How could they not feel compassion for the families that would be deprived of father or mothers, the children that they would orphan that day?

The answer is that these terrorists were products of hatred and their vicious, merciless behavior is the expression of a jaundiced world-view shaped by this hatred. In this world-view those who are different in their religion, opponents in their political views, or members of another ethnicity are not human – or not as human. Their death and suffering is justified and even deserved. Attacker and victim do not share a common humanity. In this world-view there is no room for compassion or mercy on behalf of one's opponent.

The horror of 9/11 attests to the relevance and significance of the Book of Yona's message. It provides incontrovertible and compelling testimony to the importance of remembering that all human beings are Hashem's creations and that every life is sacred. We are all members of the community of humanity. The story of Yona compels us to include all of humanity in our prayers or to risk demeaning our own humanity.

³ Rabbaynu Meir Libush (Malbim), *Commentary on Sefer Yona 1:1*.

⁴ Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, *Mesorat HaRav Yom Kippur Machzor* (New York, 2006), pp. 692-693.

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