



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת חיים

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת וילך תשס"ט • Parshas Vayeilech 5769

"LET US CONTEMPLATE... THE HOLINESS OF THIS DAY"

SPIRITUAL ZENITH

Yom Kippur. The most sublime and holy time of year; the awesome Day of Atonement and Judgment, wherein man's fate is permanently sealed; a day spent in heartfelt prayer and sincere repentance; "a day when eating is forbidden,... drinking is forbidden;... a day wherein You shall pardon us for all of our sins." (*Yom Kippur Mussaf*)

Rav Shach *zt"l*. Incessant student of Torah, servant of Hashem, teacher of the multitudes; humble *tzaddik* and a courageous leader of world Torah Jewry; reflection and transmitter of the paths of the spiritual giants (such as the Chafetz Chaim, the Brisker Rav, and many others) whom he encountered over the course of his one-hundred plus years; in short, the quintessential *gadol hador*.

Imagine if we could be privy to R' Shach's preparations for Yom Kippur. His hallowed mind must have been immersed in exalted thoughts too staggering for us to even contemplate.

Stunningly, an account of R' Shach's actual Yom Kippur preparations has recently come to light, through R' Shlomo Lorincz, noted *askan* (community activist). Emissary of numerous *gedolim*, especially in his capacity as a religious member of the Knesset, R' Lorincz was privileged to count himself amongst R' Shach's close confidants. One time, R' Shach shared his pre-Yom Kippur reflections with him.

What did this *gadol* think about to become properly attuned to the spirit of this sublime day? In his *sefer B'mechitzasam* (p. 336), R' Lorincz reveals the answer:

On *erev* Yom Kippur, R' Shach harnessed his powers of concentration, and thought about... the Big Bang theory.

With great seriousness, R' Shach contemplated the theory's utter ridiculousness. Science has shown how

our planet is perfectly situated to sustain life. Were we a bit closer to the sun, the heat would be unbearable; a bit farther, all would freeze. How could such a precise arrangement result from a mere accidental crash between cosmic materials? And from where did these supposed whirling clouds of gas originate in the first place?

The miracle of the earth's location is but one of countless examples of the uncanny perfection of our world. Myriad intricacies and complex wonders are apparent in abundance to scientists and laymen alike. R' Shach concluded that anyone operating with even a minimal amount of sanity and intellectual honesty cannot help but be overawed by the brilliance and beauty of it all, and recognize the open evidence of the Hand of the Creator and Master of the universe.

His acute sense of *emunah* (faith) thus strengthened even more, R' Shach was ready to begin the *davening*.

Why would this *gadol* choose such an unconventional approach to usher in the holiest day of the year? A closer look at the nature of this day may shed some light on R' Shach's rationale.

UNDERSTANDING THE MIKVAH PARABLE

The Mishnah (*Yoma* 8:9) states:

ואומר, (ירמיה יז) מקוה ישראל ה', מה מקוה מטהר את הטמאים, אף הקדוש ברוך הוא מטהר את ישראל.

"The verse states (*Yirmiyahu* 17:13), 'Hashem is the *mikvah* of Yisrael.' Just as a *mikvah* purifies the ritually unclean, so, too, does *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* purify Yisrael."

The Maharal (*D'rush l'Shabbos Teshuvah*) explains that the Mishnah is revealing the inner workings of the atonement process of Yom Kippur. Why does a *mikvah* eliminate defilement? A *mikvah* is an entirely pristine entity, completely devoid of impurity. Defilement simply cannot exist in such an environment.

Dedicated in loving memory of Mr. David Ringel,
ר' ישראל יוסף דוד בן הרב מרדכי ע"ה
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Consequently, when an impure individual or object is subsumed within the pure waters of the *mikvah*, the impurity, by default, disappears.

On Yom Kippur, Hashem, in a sense, is the '*mikvah*'. He is perfect; completely pure; and the Source of complete sanctity. Spiritual impurity simply can not exist in the Presence of His unmitigated holiness.

The gift Hashem offers us on this day is atonement. Throughout the year, a person has collected spiritual 'stains' on his soul as the result of sin. By cleaving to Hashem's Essence — immersing in His '*Mikvah*', if you will — the spiritual impurity vanishes.

The issue that remains, however, is being able to achieve this connection with Hashem. In *mikvah* terms, there is something which can prevent purification: namely, a *chatzitzah* (separation). An individual seeking to be cleansed from his defilement must be entirely surrounded by the *mikvah*'s purifying waters. If even a tiny area on the individual is blocked from contact with the water, the immersion may be disqualified.

The 'atonement *mikvah*' is no different. To attach oneself to Hashem, a Jew must first be free of *chatzitzos*, elements which would pose a division between himself and his Heavenly Father.

Sin serves as such a *chatzitzah*, while *teshuvah* (repentance) plays the essential role of removing these barriers. After making amends for his misdeeds, an individual stands ready to complete the atonement process. Once a Jew is free of *chatzitzos*, all that remains on his soul are the stains that the sins have created. Now that he has removed the barriers distancing him from his Creator, a Jew can draw near and 'immerse' in Hashem's Presence, thereby achieving complete forgiveness and total atonement.

Perhaps we can now understand R' Shach's seemingly novel Yom Kippur preparations a bit better. Surely, by the time Yom Kippur rolled around, someone of R' Shach's stature had thoroughly fulfilled the particulars of *teshuvah* for whatever minimal failings he may have had on his account ('failings' only according to his lofty level, of course). His spiritual state must have been quite refined by that time; few *chatzitzos* existed

between him and His Creator. In a matter of moments, he would experience the ultimate cleansing process by attaching himself to Hashem.

And so, as he prepared to 'immerse' in Hashem's '*Mikvah*', R' Shach proceeded to remove the last few remaining barriers between his physical body and the Holiness of Hashem, intensifying his *emunah* to the point that his faith in Hashem would be much greater than mere intellectual knowledge of His existence. Rather, the *gadol's* concentration would place him in a state where he could practically *feel* Hashem's Presence. This near-tangible awareness of His Presence affords a human being a level of incredible closeness to Hashem, the perfect preparation for total immersion in His '*Mikvah*'.

Of course, we do not compare to R' Shach. Yet, we can still strive to follow his example. Through observance of the day, repentance, and reflecting on Hashem's greatness, we, too, can enter the *mikvah* of atonement.

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