



## Yom Kippur – 5778 Questions & Answers

with Rabbi David Klitzker

My friends,

I invited the congregation to submit questions in advance that I would try to answer on Yom Kippur. Neuroscientists report that when you ask questions, you can increase the shape, size and number of neurons in your brain and the connections between them. That paves the way to greater intelligence. So, I hope your brains lit up as you thought of these questions.

I received a lot of questions, far more than I can cover today. But here are a few.

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### Several of you asked questions that were similar to this one:

*The Unetaneh Tokef poem seems to be saying that, at this time of year, God decides when and how we will die. True, it is based on our good or bad actions. However, the idea is that it is predetermined what will happen to us in the year to come. Do Jews believe in some sort of fate, or is that merely a bad translation?*

**Answer:** Speaking for myself, I hate the traditional theology of Unetaneh tokef. If I accepted that God judged me on Rosh Hashanah, and sealed the verdict today, I wouldn't bother to wear a seat belt or watch what I eat. What would be the point? If everything is predetermined for the year to come, what difference would it make what I do?

But it will help if we note the irony of the idea that we are judged on Rosh Hashanah and the judgment is sealed on Yom Kippur. What is this "sealing" on Yom Kippur? A legal system needs no "seal" for its verdicts; decisions are rendered by the judges, and then they are written up, not sealed!

The only reason the judgment of Rosh Hashanah is not sealed until Yom Kippur is because the entire purpose of the days following Rosh Hashanah, is to overturn the divine decree written on Rosh Hashanah! The notion that the judgment has to be sealed on Yom Kippur is specifically designed to allow that judgment to be overturned! Whoever wrote this poem, which probably comes from the 6th or 7th century, was apparently troubled by the idea that the verdict is fixed, so he added the idea of "sealing" it.

As for the various mentions of God's judgment in the Mahzor book outside of the poem that we're talking about, none of them are part of the original prayers composed by the ancient rabbis. They were all added later. Maimonides (in the 12th century) makes a really interesting comment. He says that the phrases "remember us for life," "inscribe us for life," and "the book of life" are

"the custom of some communities" (Hilkhos Tefillah 2:19). In other words, he says, some Jews pray to be written into the book. But most do not!

So what was the original idea, back in ancient times? When we look at the oldest prayers, the prayers of the Amidah, the focus is on God's rulership (otherwise known as "the Kingdom of God"). We pray that the God of Israel be universally recognized:

"Then, all that You have made will recognize you as their maker, all that You created will understand that You are their creator, and all living things will say, Adonai, the God of Israel, is sovereign, ruling over all." (Musaf Amidah)

That was the original emphasis. What we pray for as the year begins is that all people recognize God.

Why is this so important? Because recognizing God is not about theology, but rather about aligning with God's agenda. The prayer is asking, "Will you get with the program?" Will you pursue the values that are godly--"doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God" (Micah 6:8)--what I talked about in my sermon last night. The aim is to get you to lead a life in which "love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18) is the great principle.

What I'm saying is that the ancient Sages wanted us to celebrate the new year by connecting to our vision for a world that commits itself to God's pursuit of justice and peace. In other words, "shanah tovah" does not really mean "happy new year" at all! It's not a celebration with drinking and funny hats. Rather, "shanah tovah" means, "May the world be a better place."

Now how did this original message get perverted? How did all the judgment stuff enter in? I dunno. But we should try to refocus on the original themes of God's rulership and our responsibility to help God.

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**Question:** *Rabbi, High Holiday services last way too long for me.*

*Why is it necessary to stand so often during services? Standing gets us maybe 24 inches higher to God. Can't God hear us 24 inches lower down? While I know that folks who have difficulty standing can remain seated, I prefer not to stand out (sit out?) in that way.*

*Why is there so much repetition during services? If we read the Amidah silently, why does someone on the pulpit have to repeat it? And why is there a Musaf service? Can't we get the prayers done correctly without an additional service?*

**Answer:** Very briefly, let me explain that over the centuries, individual Jewish communities decided that certain poems and prayers deserved special attention, so they told people to rise for them. Customs differ from place to place. But standing has been a mode of Jewish piety, ever since we stood at Sinai to receive the commandments, to the time of the Temple in Jerusalem (where there were no chairs--all of the services were performed while standing), to our own day when we rise to say the Amidah (the Hebrew word Amidah means "standing").

Of course, you can sit if you have to, and you can sit even if you don't have to. But when you stand, something happens to you—you wake yourself up and put yourself in the presence of God. Jewish law actually states that we must not prostrate ourselves on the ground while confessing our sins, except when re-enacting the ancient Temple ritual. Why not grovel in the dirt? Because standing upright means facing up to reality. Posture means something.

Now, I agree that there is a lot of repetition in the service. If I were pope of the Jews, I would probably cut down on some of it. But the history behind the repetition of the Amidah is interesting. It used to be, before the invention of printing, that books were expensive and rare. If a congregation had only one prayerbook, people would recite the prayers as best they could; some knew the liturgy better than others. Then the reader would read from the book, thereby helping the unlearned to fulfill their obligation.

We have prayerbooks, so it's not necessary any more, you say? OK. But there is something special about our alternation of silent, private prayer and oral, public prayer. If there was no public prayer, not only would the cantors be out of business, but the whole communal dimension of our worship would likely disappear. On the other hand, if there was no silent prayer, we would miss the deep spiritual dimension of saying the prayers individually and adding our own personal meditations.

And repetition itself is not always a bad thing. It is a spiritual practice. The more you repeat words, the more they cling to you. The prayers find a way into your soul. If we say the Amidah too many times, how many times is enough? How many times is enough for a mother to hug her child? For lovers to kiss? For friends, or teacher and student, to talk?

As for the Musaf service, which is the longest part of Yom Kippur (and the most beautiful part, I think), it corresponds to the additional sacrifices that were offered in the ancient Temple on Shabbat and holidays. But look at it this way: in the morning Shararit service we are basically saying to God, please pay attention to our needs. But in the afternoon Musaf we are saying, thank you God, You give to us, here is how we want to serve You, how we want to give back to You. So each service emphasizes something different.

If our prayers today are too long for you, come on any regular Shabbat, when the service is much shorter, and the language is easier to understand, and we have a lively Torah discussion, and drink Scotch and eat lunch. It is a lot more fun than this Shabbat Yom Kippur.

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***Question** (actually two questions that I combined): Rabbi, what if I ask someone to forgive me, and he/she won't forgive? And what if I forgive someone in my heart, and later feel the resentment rise up again?*

**Answer:** It's not easy, is it? But nobody ever said it was easy.

Let me take an informal survey, suggested by Rabbi Haim Obadiah. Have you ever done something you thought was very wrong and not properly apologized for it? Raise your hands. (I see a few hands, but most people apparently answer no.)

Now, have you ever been offended by someone who did not apologize to you? (Most people answer yes, which makes you wonder how all the offenders have gone somewhere else, while all those who were offended are here with us today.)

It takes courage to own your guilt, ask for forgiveness, and make amends. Because it is so hard, we become immune to this annual ritual of chest-banging. It starts when we are young, full of hope and promises, and we say we are sorry for things like rejecting our classmates who look and think differently and rebelling against our parents. But as we mature we realize that we do such things over and over again, and we give up, and treat the Yom Kippur Vidui as just another prayer which needs to be recited once a year.

But the benefits of doing the hard work of saying we're sorry and really following through on that impulse, are enormous. Teshuva can become the very basis of life. This is why the rabbis say that it was created before the world was created. Without teshuva, without recognizing our failures and saying we're sorry about them and trying to correct them, how can we ever become happy and productive and feel secure?

All of which makes it so hard when our sincere apologies are rejected by the people we hurt. I'm always struck when people tell me they cannot forgive an insult. It's almost as if there's a mental list: I can forgive this one, but not that one. But giving forgiveness can only help us, because we don't want to carry our anger with us, a burden that can spoil our lives. It's not about whether the offender deserves to be forgiven. It's about whether you want to be free of your resentment.

And granting forgiveness is good character training. I could paraphrase Maimonides: In his Hilkhot Teshuva, the laws of teshuva, he says words to this effect: "Forgiving someone won't make them nice; it will, however, make you nicer." In other words, you will become more compassionate, no matter what happens to them.

As for forgiving someone and still having pangs of resentment, I think that's natural. Forgiving does not erase the bitter past. You can't just press the delete button. But forgiving what we cannot forget creates a new way to remember. We change the memory of our past into a hope for the future. In the future, you can say to yourself, things don't have to go downhill the way they did before.

Of course, our service is not over. There is more to come. So let me take just one more question.

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**Question:** *Rabbi, how can we handle all of the hatred in our country since the election? I feel that nobody can sit down and have an intelligent discussion with someone who disagrees politically with them. Family and friends have parted ways over this.*

**Answer:** The truth is, we discuss touchy matters best with our mouths shut. We should not talk until we can represent the other's viewpoint with a measure of empathy, even if we strongly disagree with it.

Arguing is simply not an effective way to change someone's mind. *Ve-lashon rachah tishbar garem*—but soft words can break bones, says Proverbs (25:15). That is, soft words can convince even stubborn people.

Try to focus on what is working in your relationship with the friend or family member. Many relationships are a combination of affection, ambivalence, and ambiguity. We care about those we are close with but we may not understand why they think the way they do. Do not expect any relationship to always be about agreement on the issues.

Family and friendship are only maintained through effort. Relationships must be nurtured and attended to. This is especially true in difficult times. Ultimately, if nothing else works, you will have to make a decision: to be right, or to keep your family and friends. I hope you will choose to keep your family and friends.

I thank all of you who submitted questions.