

Forgiven and Still Becoming

What Yom Kippur Begins

A Yom Kippur afternoon class

The Road and the Destination

There is a feeling that can come at the end of Yom Kippur. We have fasted. We have said Vidui again and again. We have stood through Ne'ilah. The final shofar sounds, everyone says *L'shanah haba'ah b'Yerushalayim*, and we feel an enormous release.

That release is real. Yom Kippur is not theatre. Its forgiveness is real, its purity is real, and the closeness to Hashem that we experience is real.

But relief can produce a dangerous misunderstanding. A person may think: the day is over, the slate is clean, and now the entire matter has disappeared. I can return to ordinary life as though nothing happened.

The Gemara in Yoma tells us that it is not so simple. There are different kinds of aveirah, different levels of kapparah, and different stages in the work of return. The Gemara is not weakening Yom Kippur. It is teaching us what Yom Kippur actually does.

Let us briefly return to the picture of the road that we discussed earlier. A driver suddenly realizes that he has been travelling in the wrong direction. The moment he turns the car around, something decisive has happened. He is no longer moving away from his destination. He is now facing home.

But the U-turn does not magically remove the miles already travelled. It changes the direction. It makes arrival possible. Now he must continue driving.

That is teshuvah. The Rambam defines teshuvah in future-facing language: the person leaves the sin, removes it from his thought, regrets the past, and resolves not to return to it. He is no longer the same traveller moving in the same direction. He has turned.

Yom Kippur gives that turn extraordinary power. It receives the person who has returned. It forgives, cleanses, and restores. Yet the Torah never intended Yom Kippur to be a one-day experience that allows us to return to the road on which we became lost. It is meant to redirect the year.

And we must be honest about one more point from the beginning. Merely spending the day in shul is not the same as doing teshuvah. The fast, the machzor, Kol Nidrei, Vidui, and Ne'ilah give us an extraordinary opening. But we must walk through it. The Gemara's order of kapparah repeatedly begins with the words, "if he did teshuvah." Yom Kippur does not ask only, "Were you present?" It asks, "Did you turn?"

Before we speak about what an aveirah damages, however, we must begin with something more important: what does a mitzvah build?

What a Mitzvah Builds

We often speak about mitzvos as obligations. That is correct, but incomplete. A mitzvah is not only a command that prevents punishment. **A mitzvah creates something.**

First, a mitzvah carries out the will of Hashem in the world. When a Jew gives tzedakah, keeps Shabbos, speaks honestly, puts on tefillin, guards another person's dignity, or studies Torah, **he takes the will of Hashem and gives it a physical address.** Until that moment, the mitzvah exists as Divine will. Through the person's action, that will enters money, food, time, speech, leather, parchment, and human relationships.

Obedience is not a fashionable word, but it is one of the deepest forms of loyalty. A person says: **I do not belong only to my moods. I do not serve only my appetite. My life answers to Someone.** Every mitzvah makes that loyalty more real.

Second, a mitzvah changes the person who performs it. Chazal teach that the commandments were given in order to refine human beings. A generous act does more than help its recipient; it trains the giver's hand to open. Resisting a cruel sentence does more than avoid one instance of lashon hara; it trains the tongue to recognize that another person's dignity is sacred. Shabbos does more than fill twenty-five hours with rules; it teaches a person that he is more than his production, possessions, and control.

The Mishnah says, *mitzvah goreres mitzvah*. One mitzvah draws another mitzvah. That is not only because Heaven rewards us with another opportunity. It is also because every act leaves a trace in the actor. **What I repeatedly choose becomes easier to choose.** The act becomes a habit, the habit becomes a character, and the character becomes a way of seeing.

Third, a mitzvah creates relationship. Imagine two people who say that they love one another, but one never listens to the other, never remembers what matters to the other, and never acts for the other. The claim of love remains abstract. Relationship takes form through acts of attention and loyalty.

Our bond with Hashem is deeper than any human relationship, but mitzvos give the bond expression. **Through them, love becomes conduct and faith becomes faithfulness. A**

person who performs a mitzvah says with his body, his money, and his time: Ribbono Shel Olam, Your will matters here.

Fourth, our tradition teaches that a mitzvah has effects beyond what the eye can see. The Nefesh HaChaim and the works of Kabbalah describe human action as reaching into spiritual worlds. We do not need to pretend that we can map those worlds. The central idea is enough: **no Jewish act is spiritually private**. A brachah, a word of Torah, a coin of tzedakah, or an act of restraint may appear small in this room while producing consequences far beyond this room.

There is also a fifth creation that is easy to miss. A mitzvah creates a future that otherwise would not exist. A child sees a parent apologize and learns that strength includes humility. A lonely person is invited to a table and remains connected to the community. A young person watches someone protect another Jew from embarrassment and discovers what Torah looks like when it becomes flesh and blood. We rarely know where the influence ends.

This is why a missed positive mitzvah is not merely an empty box on a checklist. Something that could have entered the world did not enter it. A person may receive forgiveness for the failure, but **the hour itself cannot be replayed**.

And this is also why the reverse is serious. If a mitzvah creates loyalty, refinement, relationship, and spiritual repair, then an aveirah is not only the violation of a rule. It damages realities that a mitzvah was meant to build.

The Chassidic masters told stories to make this invisible truth visible. Here is one of the strongest.

The Blind Angel

Chassidic tradition tells of Reb Eliakim, a wealthy merchant and a devoted follower of Reb Mordechai of Chernobyl. Reb Eliakim did not merely own beautiful things. He collected sacred objects: silver goblets, embroidered coverings for challah and matzah, and rare objects that had passed through generations of Jewish homes. In one wall of his house he had even built an aron to hold his own Sefer Torah.

One day word spread through the house: the Rebbe was coming.

Reb Eliakim hurried from room to room. The table was set. The silver was polished. When Reb Mordechai arrived, Reb Eliakim welcomed him with the joy of a man receiving royalty.

After they had spoken, Reb Eliakim began showing the Rebbe his collection. He lifted one object after another and explained its history. Whenever he saw that the Rebbe admired something, he called to his servant.

"Wrap this carefully," he said. "Place it in a crate for the Rebbe."

A silver goblet went into the crate. Then an embroidered cover. Then another treasured object. The crate filled. Reb Eliakim was glowing. There is pleasure in possessing something beautiful, but there can be even greater pleasure in giving it to one's Rebbe.

At last Reb Mordechai rose to leave. As he turned, his eyes fell upon an antique silver Chanukah menorah.

The room grew quiet.

This menorah was different. It was an heirloom, one of Reb Eliakim's most precious possessions. The Rebbe stood before it for a long time. Everyone in the room could see that he wanted it. Reb Eliakim saw it too.

But Reb Eliakim did not speak.

Finally, Reb Mordechai turned to him.

"Reb Eliakim," he said, "may I ask you for this menorah as a special gift?"

Those standing nearby watched their host. A few moments earlier he had given freely and happily. Now his face tightened. He looked at the menorah. He looked at his Rebbe. He looked back at the menorah.

Then he called the servant.

"Wrap it," he said quietly. "Put it in the Rebbe's crate."

The gifts were loaded into the carriage. Back in Chernobyl, the other objects were displayed and used. The menorah was not. Reb Mordechai ordered that it be placed in storage.

The Chassidim wondered. Why had the Rebbe pressed a man to surrender the possession he loved most, only to hide it away? But no one asked.

Time passed. Reb Eliakim died. Ten years went by. The menorah remained in storage.

Then, on the eve of Chanukah, Reb Mordechai gave an unexpected instruction.

"Bring me Reb Eliakim's menorah."

It was unpacked and polished. The Rebbe placed the oil and wicks in it. That evening, surrounded by his Chassidim, he lit it. The flames rose and trembled in the polished silver.

After watching the lights, Reb Mordechai began to speak.

"You remember this menorah," he said. "Now I will tell you its history."

It had once belonged to another wealthy Jew, Reb Yosef David. Then Reb Yosef David lost his fortune. He sold possessions, but this menorah he refused to sell. It had belonged to his family for generations.

Reb Eliakim had admired it for years. He had repeatedly offered to buy it, but Reb Yosef David always refused.

Eventually Reb Yosef David became desperate and approached Reb Eliakim for a loan. Reb Eliakim agreed. As security for the loan, he took the menorah.

The due date arrived. Reb Yosef David could not pay. The menorah remained with Reb Eliakim.

"Now listen carefully," Reb Mordechai told his Chassidim. "A good deed creates an angel. But when the deed is mixed with an improper motive, the angel carries the defect of the deed. Reb Eliakim truly performed a mitzvah. He lent money to a Jew in distress. Yet buried inside his generosity was another desire: he wanted the menorah. The mitzvah created an angel, but the angel was blind."

The room was silent except for the small sounds of the flames.

"When Reb Eliakim left this world, his deeds were placed on the scale. His merits and failings stood in perfect balance. Then the blind angel created by that loan stepped onto the side of merit, and the scale tipped in his favor.

"The Heavenly Court ruled that Reb Eliakim could enter Gan Eden. But because his margin was so narrow, the angel created by the mitzvah would have to lead him there.

"The angel was blind. For ten years, the angel and Reb Eliakim's soul wandered together, unable to find the entrance."

The Chassidim looked at the menorah. The flames now seemed to be telling the story themselves.

"That is why I asked him for this menorah," the Rebbe continued. "The gift cost him something. It was a hard act of surrender, and it corrected the self-interest hidden in the original loan. I waited for the proper moment to use it. Last night I saw Reb Eliakim and the blind angel in a dream. I understood that the time had come.

"Tonight the light of this menorah reached the upper world. The angel's eyes opened. At last it could see the path, and it led Reb Eliakim's soul into Gan Eden."

This story is preserved in the Chernobyl tradition. We do not tell it because we can inspect angels. We tell it because it expresses a Torah truth with unforgettable force: **a deed creates a reality, and the inner quality of the deed matters.** Reb Eliakim's loan was not nothing. It tipped the scale toward Gan Eden. But it was not complete either. **The mitzvah itself needed tikkun.**

That is already a more mature language than "good" or "bad." A human act can be genuinely good and still carry blindness. Teshuvah does not require us to deny the good. It asks us to heal what remained distorted inside it.

What an Aveirah Damages

Now we can understand an aveirah without reducing Judaism to fear of punishment.

An aveirah first violates the will of Hashem. It is an act of disloyalty. Sometimes the person says, in effect, "I know what You ask of me, but at this moment another master is more powerful: my anger, my desire, my money, my pride, or my need for approval."

Second, the aveirah changes the person. If mitzvah goreres mitzvah, Chazal continue, *aveirah goreres aveirah*. The first violation may feel difficult. The second feels more normal. Eventually the person no longer experiences the act as a choice. The conscience has not disappeared; it has been trained not to speak loudly.

Third, the aveirah injures relationship. Hashem does not become petty or emotionally wounded in a human sense, chas v'shalom. But from our side, sin produces distance. A person becomes less able to pray honestly, less comfortable in the presence of holiness, and more practiced at hiding from himself.

Fourth, the aveirah can damage other people and the world around us. If I embarrass someone, repentance within my own heart does not remove the memory from the other person's heart. If I steal, Vidui does not return the money. If I waste years through an addiction, the decision to stop is magnificent, but it does not automatically restore the trust, health, opportunities, or family stability lost along the way.

The simplest mashal is smoking. Imagine a person who smoked for forty years. People warned him. Doctors warned him. His family begged him. Finally, one morning he throws away the cigarettes and says, "I am finished. I will never smoke again."

That is a tremendous victory. At that moment he has genuinely changed direction. He is no longer damaging his lungs in the same way.

But if a scan reveals disease, he cannot say, "That is impossible. I stopped smoking this morning." **Stopping the cause and healing the consequence are related, but they are not identical.** Because he has stopped, healing can begin. He may now accept treatment that he previously avoided. But the lung still needs care.

The same distinction appears in the Gemara in Kiddushin. A man says to a woman, "Be married to me on condition that I am a tzaddik." Even if he was known until that moment as a complete rasha, the Gemara treats the kiddushin as possibly valid. Why? *Shema hirher teshuvah b'da'ato*—perhaps in that instant he had a true thought of teshuvah.

That is astonishing. **A person can become a tzaddik in direction in a single honest moment.** Judaism does not imprison him inside yesterday's identity.

But the Gemara does not say that every consequence of his past vanished in that instant. If he owes money, he still owes it. If he destroyed trust, trust must be rebuilt. If he trained

himself in cruelty, he must now train himself in compassion. He may truly be a baal teshuvah while still having serious work to do.

This allows us to understand the phrases *selach lanu*, *mechal lanu*, *kaper lanu*. We should present the distinctions as a helpful conceptual ladder, not as a rigid dictionary in which every siddur uses each word in only one way.

Selichah means: do not treat me only according to the punishment my act deserves.

Mechilah means: release the claim that stands between us; let the relationship reopen.

Kapparah suggests a deeper wiping away or covering over of the stain, so that the past no longer governs the relationship as it did.

And then there is *taharah*. Taharah is not only a change in the account. It is a change in the person. The Mishnah at the end of Yoma does not merely say that Hashem forgives Israel. It says, *lifnei Mi atem mitaharin u'Mi metaher eschem*—before Whom do you become pure, and Who purifies you? Hashem is the mikveh of Israel.

Forgiveness answers the question, "What will be done about my act?" Taharah answers the question, "Who am I becoming after my act?"

Yom Kippur Requires Real Teshuvah

We should now stop and make this completely practical. A person can stand in shul for the entire day, beat his chest, cry during Ne'ilah, and still carefully protect the very behavior for which he is asking forgiveness. He can say *Al cheit* for dishonesty while intending to keep money that is not his. He can confess sins of speech while already planning the next conversation. He can ask Hashem to forgive the injury he caused another person while refusing to make the telephone call that might repair it.

The atmosphere of Yom Kippur may awaken teshuvah, but **atmosphere is not yet teshuvah**.

The Rambam describes real teshuvah in concrete terms. The person must abandon the sin. He must remove it from his present plan and resolve not to return to it. He must regret what he did, and he must express that truth before Hashem in Vidui.

Regret does not mean hating oneself. It means refusing to make peace with the wrong. I recognize that I violated the will of Hashem, damaged something in myself, or injured another person. I wish that I had chosen differently. If my only regret is that I was caught, embarrassed, or punished, I regret the consequence, not yet the aveirah.

Abandoning the sin means that something changes now. If the wrong property is still in my possession, I return it. If the damaging relationship or access remains exactly as it was, I create a boundary. If my phone repeatedly brings me where I should not go, I change the

phone or its settings. If anger controls my speech, I establish a rule about when I will not answer. **Teshuvah must eventually acquire a physical address.**

The commitment for the future must also be genuine. It does not mean that I can guarantee I will never struggle or fall again. Human beings cannot guarantee the future. It means that at this moment I am not secretly reserving permission to repeat the act. I sincerely intend to live differently, and I am willing to put a practical safeguard behind that intention.

Vidui then gives the change words. I do not hide behind, "I may not always have been perfect." I name the act before Hashem. I did this. It was wrong. I regret it. I am leaving it. Help me not to return.

And for wrongs between one person and another, Yom Kippur does not remove the obligation to repair the human side. Money must be returned. A damaged person must be approached. Forgiveness may have to be requested. The person we hurt is not a prop in our private religious experience.

This is not meant to frighten us. It is meant to prevent us from substituting religious emotion for religious change. Sitting in shul is precious. Crying is precious. Feeling close to Hashem is precious. But the proof that the day entered us is that something follows the feeling.

The Four Paths of Kapparah

Rabbi Matya ben Charash asked Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah in Rome whether he had heard the four divisions of kapparah taught by Rabbi Yishmael. The answer appears in Yoma 86a.

The first category is a person who violated a positive commandment and did teshuvah. **The Gemara says he is not moved from his place before he is forgiven.**

That sounds light, but it does not mean the missed opportunity never mattered. Suppose I could have visited a lonely person and did not. Later I regret it sincerely and receive forgiveness. But that Tuesday afternoon is gone. The visit that could have happened then did not happen. Teshuvah repairs me and my relationship with Hashem; it cannot make Tuesday occur twice.

This is where the Mishnah's phrase *din v'cheshbon* becomes penetrating. The Vilna Gaon is often cited as explaining that *din* is judgment for the wrong act itself, while *cheshbon* is the accounting for what might have been done with that same time, strength, money, or attention. During the hour of anger, what conversation could have taken place? During the evening wasted, what Torah could have been learned? During the years of self-absorption, whom could I have strengthened?

The point is not to paralyze a person with imaginary histories. It is to teach that failure to do good is itself consequential. As we have been learning in the Chareidim, positive mitzvos are not decorative additions to religious life. They create realities. Their absence also leaves an absence.

The second category is the violation of an ordinary negative commandment. **Teshuvah suspends the judgment, and Yom Kippur completes the kapparah.**

The third category is more severe: prohibitions carrying kares or a court-imposed death penalty. **Teshuvah and Yom Kippur suspend, and yissurim complete the cleansing.**

This category is not an ancient museum. The Torah includes here deliberate Shabbos desecration under the conditions of the prohibition, prohibited relationships including niddah, eating chametz on Pesach, eating or drinking on Yom Kippur, and other grave violations. Not every lapse fits the technical conditions, and no one should diagnose his own halachic status from a sermon. A practical case requires a competent rav. But we should not protect ourselves with the fantasy that the severe categories have no modern address.

The fourth category is chillul Hashem. **Teshuvah, Yom Kippur, and yissurim suspend the judgment, but the final kapparah comes only with death.**

What is chillul Hashem? At its most direct, it is conduct that causes Hashem's name, Torah, or the Jewish people who represent Him to be diminished in the eyes of others. The Gemara does not describe only public heresy or a spectacular scandal. It gives examples from ordinary conduct. A Torah scholar who does not pay promptly, or whose business and conversation are unpleasant, can cause people to say, "Look at the person who learns Torah. Look at the result of his religion." The same act may become more serious when the person is publicly identified with Torah, because observers judge more than the individual. They judge what he represents.

That makes chillul Hashem painfully contemporary. A visibly Jewish person parks in a handicapped space because it is convenient. Someone watches and thinks, "He wears a kippah, but another person's need means nothing to him." The parking violation is wrong in itself. **The chillul Hashem is the additional damage: selfish conduct has now been attached to the name of Torah.**

The same can happen when a religious Jew cheats in business, humiliates an employee, refuses to pay a worker on time, shouts abusively in public, pushes ahead in a line, leaves a mess for someone else, or drives aggressively with Jewish symbols displayed on the car. The act says more than, "This individual behaved badly." It may cause another person to say, "So this is what observant Jews are like. So this is what Torah produces."

We should not use a sermon to declare the precise halachic category of every rude or inconsiderate act. The technical severity depends on the act, the person, the setting, and how publicly he represents Torah. But the concern is not remote. Every one of us carries

Jewish identity into stores, parking lots, offices, hospitals, apartment buildings, and online conversations. A chillul Hashem does not require a newspaper headline. It may begin with one stranger watching one Jew.

And the opposite is equally real. When people see a Jew conduct business honestly, yield the parking place, speak gently under pressure, pay promptly, return what no one knew was missing, or treat a worker with unusual dignity, Hashem's name becomes beloved through him. That is kiddush Hashem. The repair for chillul Hashem therefore includes creating kiddush Hashem in the very places where our conduct once sent the wrong message.

The Gemara's final line can sound frightening, but listen to what it is saying. Even chillul Hashem is not outside teshuvah. The person can return. He can change his standing and direction. He can spend the rest of his life producing kiddush Hashem where he once produced the opposite. Yet because the desecration affected the public meaning of Hashem's name, its full historical repair may extend beyond what the person can complete during life. Once another person has learned to associate Torah with selfishness or dishonesty, we cannot always locate that person and remove the impression from his mind. That is why the damage is so deep.

The four divisions therefore do not tell us that Yom Kippur fails. They tell us that kapparah is fitted to reality. A shallow wound and a deep wound do not receive the same treatment. The physician who prescribes more treatment for the deeper wound is not denying the value of the first medicine.

We can now state four distinct achievements.

Teshuvah changes direction.

Yom Kippur restores and cleanses the relationship.

Tikkun addresses what the act damaged.

Taharah forms a person who can live differently.

Sometimes these occur together. Sometimes they unfold over time. The mistake is to collapse them into one sentence: "I said Vidui, so there is nothing left to do."

The next Chassidic story presses this point even further. It asks us to imagine that an unpaid obligation is not simply forgotten because the debtor is no longer standing before us.

The Horse That Paid a Debt

The story appears in *Shivchei HaBaal Shem Tov*, one of the earliest collections of stories about the Baal Shem Tov.

During one of his journeys, the Baal Shem Tov stopped in a village at the home of a prosperous farmer who was one of his Chassidim. The farmer was overjoyed. He prepared a large meal, seated the Rebbe at the head of the table, and spoke proudly of the blessings Hashem had given him.

The Baal Shem Tov listened.

"And your livelihood?" he asked. "How are your affairs?"

"Baruch Hashem, Rebbe. The fields are producing. The business is sound. I cannot complain."

After a while the Baal Shem Tov asked, "Do you have good horses?"

The farmer smiled. A farmer knows his horses, and he was proud of his stable.

"Very good horses."

"Let us see them," said the Baal Shem Tov.

They walked out to the stable. The farmer showed him one animal after another. The Baal Shem Tov stopped beside a small, young horse. It was not the largest or most impressive animal there, but the Rebbe examined it carefully.

"Give me this horse as a gift," he said.

The farmer's smile disappeared.

"Rebbe, ask me for another horse. Ask me for two. But please do not ask for this one."

"Why this one?"

The farmer stroked the horse's neck.

"There are places where three strong horses cannot move a loaded wagon. This little horse pulls it alone. I have seen it happen more than once. I have become attached to him."

The Baal Shem Tov did not argue. They returned to the house.

Later the conversation turned again to the farmer's prosperity.

"People owe you money?" the Rebbe asked.

"Of course. A person in business always has debts outstanding."

"Bring me the notes. I would like to see them."

The farmer was puzzled, but he brought a bundle of promissory notes. The Baal Shem Tov examined them one by one. Then he stopped at a particular document.

"Give me this note as a gift."

The farmer looked at the name and laughed.

"Rebbe, this paper is worthless. The debtor died several years ago and left no property. There is nothing to collect."

"Nevertheless," said the Baal Shem Tov, "I want this note."

The farmer handed it to him.

The Baal Shem Tov held the document in both hands and tore it in half.

Then he tore it again.

"The debt is forgiven," he said. "Completely forgiven."

He turned to the farmer.

"Go to the stable and see how your little horse is doing."

The farmer stared at him. Then he took a lantern and hurried outside.

A moment later a cry came from the stable.

The farmer returned pale and shaken.

"Rebbe, the horse is dead. He is lying in the stall. He was perfectly healthy. What happened?"

The Baal Shem Tov answered: "The man named in that note died without the means to pay you. It was decreed that he give you the value of his debt through difficult labor. His soul entered that horse. That is why the animal could perform the work of three horses. He was repaying what he owed.

"The moment you gave me the note and the debt was fully forgiven, his obligation ended. His soul returned to its place. The horse's work was finished."

Whether we hear the story literally, mystically, or as the moral imagination of Chassidus, its challenge is clear. **An unpaid debt remains a claim. A wrong act creates unfinished business.** Forgiveness is powerful precisely because there was something real to forgive.

Notice also what frees the soul. It is not a speech about forgiveness. It is an act. The note is surrendered. The claim is released. Something changes in the world.

That is the question after Yom Kippur. What note still needs to be torn? What money must be returned? What apology must be spoken? What pattern must be retrained? What positive act can now be created where there was an absence?

How Yissurim Cleanse

We now reach the part of the Gemara that makes many people uncomfortable. Why should yissurim be necessary? If a person has sincerely repented and Yom Kippur has passed, what can suffering add?

Before answering, we must not soften the Gemara's words. **Yissurim in their plain meaning are suffering.** They are not merely the inconvenience of remaining in the beis midrash for another half hour. They can mean bodily pain, illness, weakness, financial pressure, humiliation, loss, or a life whose ease has been sharply interrupted. In the Gemara's severe third category, teshuvah and Yom Kippur suspend the judgment, and yissurim complete the cleansing. **The person has genuinely returned, and Yom Kippur has genuinely acted, but the process of kapparah may still include actual suffering.**

That is a serious statement, and we should allow the congregation to feel its seriousness. We cannot simply say, "I sat through Yom Kippur, I fasted, I said the words, and therefore nothing painful can remain in the account." According to the Gemara, for grave aveiros there can be unfinished business. If the cleansing requires yissurim, a person cannot assume that they will vanish merely because Ne'ilah ended. They may come into his life.

Why would suffering cleanse? An aveirah often gives the body, the appetite, and the ego a throne. The physical demand of this moment becomes my master. I am angry, so I must speak. I desire, so I must take. I am tired, so I cannot learn. I am embarrassed, so I cannot apologize. I want the money, so I will bend the truth. I want approval, so I will abandon what I know.

Yissurim break that illusion of sovereignty. A person who thought his strength, comfort, plans, and control were permanent discovers that the body is not the whole self and that comfort is not the purpose of life. Suffering can force a person to ask: if my body is weakened, who am I? If my plans have collapsed, what remains? It can turn him away from the fantasy that he is only physical and bring him back to the neshamah that can still choose, pray, trust, and serve.

This connects directly to what we discussed on Rosh Hashanah about thunder. Chazal say that thunder was created to straighten the crookedness of the heart. The body settles into certainty: I am safe, I am in control, tomorrow belongs to me. Then the sky cracks, the person trembles, and the heart remembers that there is a Master above him. **Yissurim can do over time what thunder does in a moment. They lower the body's voice so that the neshamah can be heard again.**

This does not mean that every sufferer automatically becomes purified. Pain can also make a person bitter or closed. The cleansing lies in what the suffering breaks open: false

mastery, arrogance, addiction to ease, and the belief that physical life is everything. Properly received, yissurim can restore the spiritual hierarchy of a human being.

Only after hearing that plain meaning can we introduce two necessary boundaries.

First, we do not interpret another person's suffering. We do not look at someone who is ill, bereaved, financially distressed, or emotionally overwhelmed and announce that we know what Hashem is cleansing. That is cruelty disguised as theology. The Gemara gives us a framework for our own avodah, not a license to explain someone else's pain.

Second, Judaism does not ask us to seek illness, danger, or psychological harm. A person should care for his health and ask Hashem for a good and peaceful life. We are not permitted to damage ourselves. But we are also not required to sit passively and wait for painful yissurim to arrive.

Here Rabbeinu Yonah gives us the antidote. In the fourth gate of *Shaarei Teshuvah*, while discussing the severe category whose kapparah includes yissurim, he teaches that a person can bring upon himself demanding forms of avodah that stand in the place of other suffering. He cites the toil of Torah, which consumes strength. He speaks of acts of kindness and of accepting difficulty as part of repair. He also mentions fasting, though that requires judgment and is not the right practice for everyone.

The principle is enormously empowering precisely because the danger is real. **If yissurim are needed, do not wait for yissurim to choose you. Be wise and choose your yissurim:** not sickness, not danger, and not self-destruction, but the genuine pain of serving Hashem beyond comfort. Choose the weariness of Torah, the inconvenience of chesed, the humiliation of an honest apology, the loss involved in restitution, and the discipline of refusing an appetite. The person is saying: "Ribbono Shel Olam, let the difficulty that cleanses me be difficulty I accept in order to come closer to You."

This is not a guarantee that a person can dictate Hashem's account, and it is not a mechanical bargain. But Rabbeinu Yonah is telling us that chosen spiritual exertion has real cleansing power and can avert the need for other yissurim. We should therefore be strong enough to hear the Gemara and smart enough to act on its remedy.

For one person, that means remaining in the beis midrash when he would rather go home, provided he does not damage his health or his responsibilities. The point is not reckless sleep deprivation. The point is sustained effort beyond convenience.

For another, it means volunteering for the job that receives no honor: setting up, cleaning up, driving someone repeatedly to appointments, visiting the person whose conversation is difficult, or taking responsibility when everyone else slips away.

For someone who sinned with money, chosen repair may mean restitution that hurts. It may mean giving up a purchase, admitting an error in an invoice, or returning money that no one else would ever know about.

For someone who sinned with speech, the repair may be the pain of silence. He has the perfect sentence, the room is waiting to laugh, and he does not say it. That small internal burning can be a holy yissur. It is the place where the old self loses authority.

For someone who injured a relationship, it may mean the pain of an apology without self-defense: "I did this. It was wrong. I understand what it cost you. What can I do to repair it?" The ego experiences those words as suffering. The neshamah experiences them as liberation.

This is not bargaining with Hashem: "I will suffer for three hours, and You cancel the account." **It is transformation.** The chosen effort cleanses because it contradicts the root of the aveirah. Where I once chose comfort over duty, I now choose duty over comfort. Where I once protected ego, I now accept humility. Where I once took, I now give.

The best post-Yom Kippur resolution is therefore not necessarily dramatic. It should be concrete, connected to the damage, and sustainable.

Ask four questions.

What did this pattern damage in my loyalty to Hashem?

What did it train inside me?

Whom or what did it injure outside me?

What repeated mitzvah would repair the same place?

If the aveirah was anger, the tikkun may include a rule that no difficult message is sent for thirty minutes. If it was neglect of Torah, the tikkun may be a fixed seder protected from negotiation. If it was dishonesty, the tikkun includes restitution and a business practice that removes the temptation. If it was indifference to another person, the tikkun may be a regular act of chesed that costs time.

This is how chosen yissurim become meaningful without glorifying pain. We choose the exertion of becoming free before suffering must be imposed upon us.

Before Ne'ilah, each person should identify one piece of unfinished business. Not ten vague resolutions. One real item. Is there money to return? A person to call after Yom Kippur? A harmful access point to remove? A fixed mitzvah to establish? A public habit that has made Torah look smaller rather than greater? Decide now what the first action will be, and when it will be done. That decision is how inspiration begins to become teshuvah.

From Yom Kippur into Sukkos

Now we can correct the most important possible misunderstanding of this class.

The message is not that Yom Kippur did not work. The message is that Yom Kippur worked so powerfully that we can now begin the next stage.

If Yom Kippur were meant to be a spiritual goodbye, the Jewish calendar would give us a long rest afterward. Instead, halachah tells us that those who are meticulous begin working on the sukkah immediately after Yom Kippur, *k'dei latzeis mimitzvah el mitzvah*—to go from one mitzvah directly into another. We eat, and then we pick up a board, measure a wall, or do something toward the sukkah.

That practice is the entire class in one image.

Ne'ilah ends. The gates close. We do not say, "Goodbye, Hashem. We will meet again next Elul." We take the purity of Yom Kippur and build it into a place where we will eat, drink, talk, sing, welcome guests, and sleep.

On Yom Kippur we step away from the physical. We do not eat or drink. We do not anoint ourselves or wear leather shoes. For one day we live as nearly as possible like souls.

Sukkos asks a harder question: can the soul return to the body without losing what it discovered? Can eating become a mitzvah? Can sleep take place inside kedushah? Can family conversation, hospitality, music, and ordinary pleasure live beneath the schach?

The sukkah is therefore not a departure from Yom Kippur. It is Yom Kippur entering life.

Chassidic teaching associates the sukkah with the embrace described in Shir HaShirim, *v'yemino techabkeini*—His right hand embraces me. On Yom Kippur we stood exposed before Hashem, stripped of excuses. On Sukkos, Hashem surrounds us. The relationship moves from confession into embrace.

And the process continues. Rosh Hashanah identifies the King and the destination. The Aseres Yemei Teshuvah intensify the turn. Yom Kippur brings forgiveness, kapparah, and taharah. Sukkos places the returning Jew inside the embrace and teaches him to live physically without becoming merely physical.

Hoshana Rabbah adds another layer. The basic language of our tefillos is that the judgment is sealed on Yom Kippur. The Zohar and later tradition describe Hoshana Rabbah as the time when the *pitkin*, the notices of judgment, are delivered for implementation. We should not say that Yom Kippur was unreal or that nothing was settled. We should say that the spiritual decision continues to move toward lived reality.

Some Chassidic traditions extend this unfolding even to Zos Chanukah. That too is fitting. The light that began in the intense holiness of Tishrei must eventually stand in a window, at home, facing the street and the darkness. The question is whether the light survives when the great season is over.

This gives us a different way to hear the final shofar of Ne'ilah.

It is not Hashem saying goodbye.

It is not the sound of a courthouse emptying after the files have been closed.

It is the signal given to a traveller who has found the road again.

You have turned. Now travel.

You have been forgiven. Now repair.

You have been purified. Now build a life that can hold the purity.

In a few days, take the relationship outside and build it walls. Put schach above it. Eat inside it. Invite another Jew into it. Make the new direction physical.

The great achievement of Yom Kippur is not that the past becomes imaginary. It is that the past no longer has the right to determine the future.

That is the unfinished business with which we should leave. Not terror, and not the feeling that Yom Kippur failed. We leave knowing that Hashem has allowed us to turn around, and therefore we can now do what remains: return what must be returned, repair what can be repaired, retrain what must be retrained, and fill the coming days with the mitzvos that were missing before.

The smoker can stop and begin treatment. The debtor's note can be torn. The blind angel can receive sight. The missed mitzvah can become the source of a new commitment. The person who was a rasha a moment ago can turn toward Hashem and be called a tzaddik in his new direction.

But he must keep walking.

When the shofar sounds tonight, let us hear Hashem saying: You have found the road again. Now walk with Me.

Addendum One The Snuffbox and the Judgment

This story comes from *Kahal Chasidim HeChadash Emunas Tzadikim*, published in Lemberg in 1902.

It was Rosh Hashanah in the beis midrash of the Baal Shem Tov. The room was filled with the sound of prayer. Men stood wrapped in their talleisim, each one occupied with the judgment of the day.

In the middle of the tefillah, a small object slipped from one Chassid's hand and struck the floor.

It was his snuffbox.

The man bent down, picked it up, opened it, and took a small pinch of tobacco, as people commonly did in those days.

Another Chassid saw him.

He was a serious man, a man who valued prayer. A thought of anger flashed through him.

"On Rosh Hashanah?" he thought. "In the middle of tefillah he stops for tobacco?"

He did not shout. He did not publicly shame the man. The entire accusation occurred silently inside his heart.

But the Baal Shem Tov saw what that thought had caused in the upper worlds. The indignation of this righteous man had become a kitrug against his fellow. A decree was issued that the man with the snuffbox would die during the coming year.

The Baal Shem Tov made an ascent of the soul. He argued before the Heavenly Court. He pleaded for the Chassid. He sought some opening through which the decree might be annulled.

He did not succeed.

Rosh Hashanah passed. Yom Kippur passed. Sukkos arrived.

On the night of Hoshana Rabbah, the Chassidim gathered to recite the traditional tikkun and learn through the night. Once again the Baal Shem Tov ascended to the higher worlds. Once again he pleaded.

At last the Heavenly Court agreed to one possibility.

"If the man who judged his fellow harshly will himself find a merit for him," they ruled, "the decree can be cancelled."

The Baal Shem Tov returned to the beis midrash. He saw the accusing Chassid bent over a Mishnah, learning tractate Horayos as part of the night's order.

The Baal Shem Tov did something strange. He removed the man's ability to concentrate.

The Chassid read a line. It would not enter his mind. He tried again. The words would not join together. He closed the sefer, opened it, and attempted another mishnah. Nothing.

Frustrated, he rose and began walking around the beis midrash. If he could not learn, at least he would think about Hashem and the mysteries of creation.

For no obvious reason, his mind turned to tobacco.

"Why," he wondered, "did this plant become known particularly in these later generations? What spiritual purpose could there be in inhaling a scent?"

He began to think in the mystical language of his world. Perhaps there are souls that require a very fine and delicate form of elevation, something connected to scent, as the Torah speaks of *rei'ach nicho'ach*, a pleasing fragrance before Hashem.

Then he remembered Rosh Hashanah.

He saw again the snuffbox falling, the Chassid bending, and his own flash of contempt.

His heart softened.

"Who knows?" he thought. "Perhaps while I was condemning him, that holy Jew was elevating precious sparks and souls through that very scent. Who am I to know what was occurring in his avodah?"

At that instant, the accusation he had created began to dissolve.

The next morning, the Baal Shem Tov received his Chassidim. On Hoshana Rabbah they would prepare questions in Torah and avodah, and he would answer them.

The Chassid approached.

"Rebbe, I have been thinking about the purpose of tobacco."

The Baal Shem Tov looked at him.

"Tell me your answer," he said.

The man explained his thought about scent and the elevation of souls.

"And what else did you think?" asked the Baal Shem Tov.

The Chassid hesitated. Then he told him about the man on Rosh Hashanah, the snuffbox, his harsh judgment, and the merit he had now found.

The Baal Shem Tov's face filled with joy.

"At this moment," he said, "a decree of death has been cancelled."

Then he told the Chassid everything that had occurred in Heaven from Rosh Hashanah until that morning.

"Train yourself," the Baal Shem Tov warned him, "to judge a God-fearing Jew favorably. When you judge him harshly, you awaken judgment against him. When you find his merit, you bring him kindness."

The story shows that the movement from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur to Hoshana Rabbah is not a sequence of disconnected dates. A judgment created on Rosh Hashanah is still being addressed on Hoshana Rabbah. More important, the repair does not come through a magical erasure. The same heart that produced accusation must learn to produce merit.

Addendum Two The Fish and the Drowning Dog

This story is based on a tradition in *Shivchei HaBaal Shem Tov*.

Reb Yudel was travelling before Shabbos with a small party. The road was difficult, the hour was growing late, and they still hoped to reach the next village before sunset.

Their route brought them to a river crossing. The water was high and violent. A local dog ran near them and entered the river.

At once the current seized it.

The animal tried to swim, but the water rolled it over. Its head appeared, disappeared, and appeared again. It cried out as it struggled.

Reb Yudel stood helpless on the bank. He watched the dog sink beneath the water and surface once more. Pity broke through him, and he began to weep.

The dog disappeared.

The travellers now understood that they could not cross safely. They turned back to the inn where they had stayed earlier.

As Shabbos approached, Reb Yudel asked the innkeeper, "Please, see if you can find fish for Shabbos."

The innkeeper went from place to place. At the river he found local fishermen who had just pulled in their nets. Inside was an enormous pike, larger than any fish he remembered seeing caught in that village.

He bought it and hurried home. There was just enough time to prepare it in several dishes for the Shabbos meal.

That night Reb Yudel sat at the table singing zemiros. Before he ate from the fish, a heavy sleep came over him. His head dropped, and he dreamed.

His deceased father, Reb Yosef the preacher, appeared before him.

"My son," he said, "you must understand what happened today.

"My soul was present in this fish. During my life there was a Jewish informer whom I pursued or rebuked improperly, and my conduct contributed to his becoming worse. His soul was in the dog that entered the river.

"The dog's drowning, and the compassion and tears it awakened in you, brought that soul its tikkun. Because of my responsibility in the matter, I too required a tikkun. That is why I came into this fish.

"Now eat the fish with care and holy intention. Through your mitzvah at the Shabbos table, my soul will be lifted as well."

Reb Yudel awoke.

The river they could not cross, the dog, the tears, the forced return to the inn, the extraordinary fish, and the Shabbos table were no longer separate accidents. Each event had become part of one unfinished moral history reaching toward repair.

This is Chassidic spiritual narrative, not permission to decode ordinary events. Its purpose is not to make us superstitious. Its purpose is to awaken moral seriousness.

A moment of harshness may continue after we have forgotten it. A tear of compassion may repair more than we understand. A mitzvah performed now may complete work that began long ago. Human life contains consequences beyond the range of our sight, and therefore no act of teshuvah, compassion, or holiness should ever be dismissed as small.