

**THE THIRD LETTER**

# Take the Angel Home

*Ne'ilah Drash | The conclusion of the Three Letters series*

**THE THIRD LETTER**

At Kol Nidrei, we opened the first letter. The son learned that the life he had been living could not continue. Something had to end.

At Yizkor, we opened the second letter. The son was told: Before you come to me, make certain that I will recognize you. We asked whether our parents would recognize in us the values, faith and decency they attempted to leave behind.

But now, at Ne'ilah, we open the third and final letter.

***My child, you are not supposed to die. You are being given your life back. But somewhere within that life, a treasure is buried. Go back. Dig for it. Find it. And use it.***

**THE HUNGARIAN GER TZEDEK**

What is that treasure? I personally heard the following story from Rabbi Azriel Tauber, who was himself a Holocaust survivor.

During the Holocaust, there was a famous Hungarian convert to Judaism - a ger tzedek. When the Nazis began rounding up the Jews, he willingly joined them.

People who knew his background pleaded with him: "You do not have to go with the Jews. You were not born Jewish. You were born a Hungarian gentile. Say that you are not Jewish. Your original identity can save you. No one needs to know that you converted."

But he refused. He had chosen to become a Jew, and now, when Jewish identity could cost him his life, he would not abandon the Jewish people. He was prepared to die al kiddush Hashem as a Jew.

What could possibly have brought a person to make such a choice? Why had this Hungarian gentile originally decided to convert?

Years earlier, he had conducted business regularly with Jews. He knew Jews as merchants and customers. He spoke with them and dealt with them, but he was not Jewish and had no particular connection to Judaism.

Then, on one Yom Kippur, he happened to be standing outside a synagogue as the day ended. The doors opened, and the Jewish worshippers began walking out.

They had been fasting all day. They had spent hours wrapped in their talleisim, crying, confessing, pleading and singing. Their faces were pale from the fast, but illuminated by something he had never seen before.

***“These people look like angels. A religion capable of transforming human beings into angels is a religion I want to join.”***

That was the beginning of his journey to Judaism. Years later, when the Nazis offered him the opportunity to deny that choice and save himself, he refused. The man who had once stood outside the synagogue watching the angels emerge was now prepared to share their fate.

This is not a halachic judgment about what another person would have been obligated to do. It is testimony to what Jewish identity had come to mean to this man. Judaism was not an inconvenience he was forced to carry. It was the greatest treasure he had ever discovered.

## **HE SAW THEM WALKING OUT**

But there is one detail in this story that is especially important. He did not see those Jews when they entered the synagogue. He saw them walking out.

He saw them when Yom Kippur was over - when they were returning to food, family, business and ordinary physical life. And that is precisely where we now stand.

For the past twenty-five hours, we have behaved almost as though we were leaving this world. We have not eaten or drunk. We have withdrawn from physical pleasure. We have stood dressed in white, speaking not to the world but to HaKadosh Baruch Hu.

The Maharal explains that the five restrictions of Yom Kippur separate us from physical existence until, for one day, we become domeh lemalach - we resemble an angel.

In a few minutes, Ne'ilah will end. We will say Shema Yisrael. We will proclaim seven times, Hashem Hu HaElokim. The shofar will sound. And then we will walk out. Perhaps, for a few moments, we will look like angels too.

## **ANGELS STAND HUMAN BEINGS WALK**

But what happens to the angel tomorrow morning?

Chassidus makes an important distinction between an angel and a human being. The Navi Zechariah calls the angels ha'omdim - those who stand. An angel is spiritually

perfect, but it remains in the place assigned to it. It has one mission, and it fulfills that mission.

A human being, however, is called a mehalech - one who walks. A human being can struggle, choose, fall, change and ascend. An angel remains where it was created. A human being can become something that yesterday seemed impossible.

***The treasure is another year of ordinary human life, now lived with the knowledge that an angelic soul is buried within it.***

## THE TREASURE INSIDE ORDINARY LIFE

Tonight, HaKadosh Baruch Hu returns our physical lives to us. We will eat again. We will drink again. We will return to our homes, families, businesses and possessions. We will receive back our time, our strength, our relationships and, please God, another year of life.

But now we know what can be buried within all that gashmiyus. A meal can become a mitzvah. Money can become tzedakah. A home can become a place of Torah and chesed. An ordinary hour can become an hour that changes another person's life.

***The treasure is an ordinary physical life capable of carrying an extraordinary neshama.***

This is why, when Yom Kippur concludes, the pasuk says: Lech echol b'simchah lachmecha - "Go, eat your bread with joy, for Hashem has accepted your deeds." We do not remain fasting. We return to bread and wine, to homes and families.

And the Rema writes that immediately after Yom Kippur, those who are meticulous begin working on the sukkah - mei'mitzvah el mitzvah, proceeding directly from one mitzvah to another.

## THE ANGEL BECOMES A BUILDER

**After an entire day of resembling angels, what is the first thing the Jew does? He picks up a hammer.**

***The angel becomes a builder.***

That is the message of the third letter. Before the shofar sounds, each of us should identify one physical part of our life - one hour, one relationship, one possession or one amount of money - that will be used differently because of this Yom Kippur.

Not ten resolutions. One piece of the treasure. Something real that will prove that the person who walked out after Ne'ilah did not leave the angel behind with the machzor and the kittel.

That Hungarian convert stood outside a synagogue and saw what Yom Kippur could make of a Jew. The question is whether our families will see it when we come home. Will the people with whom we work see it? Will those who speak with us tomorrow recognize that something has changed?

***The third letter tells us: You are not meant to die. You are being given your life back. But do not return to exactly the same life. There is a treasure buried within the year ahead of you. Go home, dig for it and bring it into the world.***

## TAKE THE ANGEL HOME

HaKadosh Baruch Hu, seal us in the Book of Life. Give us another year of health, family, livelihood and blessing. Give us the ordinary human life that we have temporarily put aside - and help us fill that life with the angelic soul we uncovered today.

**We will not leave the angel in shul. We will take the angel home. We will build something with it.**

**The gates are closing - but the treasure is just beginning to open.**

**Torah sources:** Maharal, Drashah for Shabbos Shuvah; Zechariah 3:7; Koheles 9:7; Rema, Orach Chaim 624:5.