

The Three Letters

A Kol Nidrei Drush for Yom Kippur

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Website and Public Edition

My dear friends, we have just stood together and said Kol Nidrei. Before we begin Maariv, I want to ask one question.

It is not a comfortable question. But Kol Nidrei is not an ordinary evening, and Yom Kippur is not an ordinary day. There are questions that we can avoid all year. Tonight, one of them has followed us into shul.

If you knew with absolute certainty that you had only twenty-four hours left to live, how would you spend them?

I do not mean that a doctor had frightened you. I do not mean that you were worried something might happen. I mean that there was no doubt. Twenty-four hours from now, your life in this world would be over.

Whom would you call? Whom would you ask to forgive you? Whom would you finally forgive? What would suddenly stop mattering? Which resentment would look embarrassingly small? Which mitzvah would you no longer postpone? What would you say to your spouse, your children, your parents, your friends? What would you say to the Ribbono Shel Olam?

And here is the harder question. If that is how we would spend the final twenty-four hours of our lives, why is that not how we are prepared to spend the next twenty-four hours?

Because that is Yom Kippur.

Not, chas veshalom, a day on which we seek death. Judaism chooses life. The Torah commands us, “Uvacharta bachayim” — choose life. If a person is required by halachah to eat or drink on Yom Kippur, that person is not observing a lesser Yom Kippur. At that moment, eating is the mitzvah. Protecting life is the avodah.

But for approximately twenty-four hours, Yom Kippur asks us to step outside the ordinary experience of physical life. We do not eat. We do not drink. We do not wash for pleasure. We do not anoint ourselves. We do not wear leather shoes. Husband and wife separate. We wear white. Some wear a kittel, the garment in which they will one day be buried. We spend the day in shul, standing before Hashem, saying words that a person must say before there is no longer time to say them.

Yom Kippur is not death. It is the gift of confronting death while we are still alive. **It is a rehearsal for the clarity of the final day, followed by the miracle of receiving life again.**

There is a mashal told in the name of the Dubno Maggid. Tonight I will share an expanded adaptation of that mashal. A mashal is not offered as history. It is a mirror. And if we look into this mirror honestly, I believe we will see the entire day of Yom Kippur.



The Child of Their Prayers

There once lived a husband and wife who had almost everything a person could ask for. They had a beautiful home, an honorable name, a successful business, and enough money to help others quietly and generously. Their table was open. Their reputation was spotless. But one blessing was missing.

They had no child.

One year passed, then another. Five years became ten. Ten became fifteen. Every simchah they attended contained both joy and pain. They danced at other people's brissim. They brought gifts to other people's children. They smiled when people blessed them, then returned home to a house that was too quiet.

For twenty years they davened. The mother lit Shabbos candles and wept. The father traveled to tzaddikim. They gave tzedakah. They accepted brachos. They tried not to complain. Then, after twenty years, when hope had become almost too fragile to touch, a child was born.

A son.

No child had ever been more wanted. No cry had ever sounded more beautiful. The father held the baby and could barely speak. The mother looked at him and whispered, "Every tear was worth it."

They named him, celebrated him, protected him, and dreamed for him. His father imagined teaching him a blatt Gemara. His mother imagined walking him to the chuppah. They did not dream that he would be wealthy. They already had wealth. They dreamed that he would be good. That he would be kind. That he would be a faithful Jew. That he would continue everything holy that they had tried to build.

For a while, the child fulfilled every dream. He was bright and charming. He learned quickly. He had the sort of smile that made adults forgive him before he had even apologized. But as he grew older, his charm became a way of escaping responsibility. He discovered companions who admired his money more than they cared about his soul. They laughed at his father's old-fashioned discipline. They mocked the restrictions of the Torah. They introduced him to places where nobody asked who he was becoming, as long as he paid the bill.

At first, he told himself that he was only having a little fun. Then he began coming home late. Then he stopped coming home for Shabbos. Then he stopped coming home at all.

His father pleaded with him. "My son, everything I have will one day be yours. But what will become of you? Money can purchase a bed, but not sleep. It can purchase company, but not loyalty. It can purchase pleasure, but not peace. Come home."

Sometimes his father's words reached him for a moment. The son would lower his eyes and say, "I promise, Tatte. This is the last time. Next Shabbos I will be home. Tomorrow I will end it. From now on, everything will be different."

His mother wanted to believe every promise. His father wanted to believe them too. But the promises became another form of escape. He used words not to bind himself to change, but to purchase enough quiet to continue unchanged.

The son heard only control. He saw his father's tears and called them manipulation. He saw his mother's fear and called it weakness. When they warned him about his friends, he defended the friends and attacked the people who loved him.

Eventually, the money his father gave him was not enough. He borrowed. First from respectable people. Then from less respectable people. Then from men whose loans came with smiles that did not reach their eyes.

At first, each broken promise troubled him. Then it troubled him less. Eventually, "I promise" became another coin he spent even when there was nothing behind it.

He signed notes he could not repay. He promised dates he could not meet. He borrowed from one man to quiet another. And every time the walls closed in, he found a new distraction so that he would not have to think.

His mother's heart broke slowly. There was no single day on which it happened. It broke on every Friday night when his chair remained empty. It broke whenever footsteps approached the house and then passed by. It broke when someone mentioned seeing him in a place where her son should never have been. She continued to leave the porch light burning.

One winter she became ill. The son visited, but not often enough, and never for long. He could not bear the quiet accusation of the room. Shortly before she died, she held his hand and said, "I am not asking you to become the person I imagined. I am asking you to become the person you truly are."

He cried at her levayah. For seven days he sat shivah. For several weeks he behaved differently. Then the old company returned, and the old life swallowed him again.

The father aged. His beard whitened. His back bent. But something inside him remained steady. He stopped arguing with his son. He stopped sending money. He did not stop loving him.

When the father became seriously ill, the son came to see him. He told himself he had come out of concern. But another thought had already entered his mind: soon the entire estate would be his. The house, the business, the accounts, the land. All his debts could disappear in a single afternoon.

The father looked at him for a long time. He seemed to know every thought passing through his son's mind.

"My son," he said softly, "you believe that what I leave behind will solve your problems. It may. But not in the way you think."

The son lowered his eyes.

"I have arranged my affairs," the father continued. "You will receive what is yours, but you must follow my instructions exactly. On my first yahrzeit, you are to come alone to this house. The house will remain locked until then. At nine o'clock in the morning, the caretaker will give you the key. At three o'clock in the afternoon, you must leave. You will have six hours. Whatever you find during those six hours will be yours."

"And before then?" the son asked.

"Before then, nothing."

A few days later, the father died.



The Year of Waiting

The son expected the will to rescue him immediately. Instead, he learned that the business had been sold, the bank accounts emptied, and most of the visible assets used to settle obligations and support charitable causes. The great house stood locked. The only inheritance named for him was whatever he would find there on the first yahrzeit.

He was furious. He accused the lawyers of dishonesty. He accused the caretaker of hiding information. In his worst moments, he even accused his father of cruelty.

Meanwhile, the debts multiplied.

The men who had lent him money became less patient. One evening, three of them cornered him in a back room.

"We have waited long enough," one said.

"My father's yahrzeit is coming," the son answered. "He left everything hidden in the house. Give me until that day. I will pay every coin."

"And if there is nothing?"

"There will be."

The oldest of the men leaned close. "We will be outside the house. At three o'clock, you will walk out with our money. If you do not, you will not walk away."

The son agreed because he had no choice. During the remaining weeks, he dreamed of treasure. Gold behind the walls. Documents beneath the floor. Jewels

inside furniture. His father had always been clever. Surely this strange condition was only a test designed to keep impatient hands away.

At last, the yahrzeit arrived.

At nine in the morning, the caretaker unlocked the front door and handed him the key. "Your father instructed me not to enter with you," he said. "At three, I return."

Across the road, the creditors were waiting.

The son entered the house of his childhood and locked the door behind him.

Dust covered everything. The curtains were drawn. The rooms smelled closed and old. On one wall hung a faded family portrait: his mother smiling, his father standing straight, and between them a boy who still trusted both of them.

He turned the picture facedown.

Then he began to search.

He pulled books from shelves and shook them. He cut open cushions. He emptied drawers onto the floor. He tapped walls, listening for hollow spaces. He pried up boards. He tore fabric from chairs. He broke the lock on his father's desk.

Nothing.

Ten o'clock became eleven. Eleven became noon. Sweat ran down his face. Dust covered his clothing. The elegant rooms became wreckage.

At one o'clock, he found no treasure.

At two, he found no treasure.

At two-thirty, he looked through a crack in the curtain. The creditors were still there.

He searched more violently. He cursed the house. He cursed the will. He cursed his father. "You knew what they would do to me! You knew, and you left me nothing!"

Then, at a quarter to three, he noticed a small envelope resting on the mantelpiece. It had been there all day, plainly visible, but he had been too consumed by his imagined treasure to see it.

On the envelope were the words: "To my beloved son."



The First Letter

His hands trembled as he opened it.

"My beloved son,

"If you are reading this letter, then everything has unfolded as I feared. You have entered this house expecting money. You have searched every room. You have probably damaged the home your mother and I built. And now you have discovered that there is nothing here that can satisfy the men waiting outside.

"Do not be surprised that I know. A father sees farther down the road than a son who is running with his eyes closed. I watched the people you chose. I saw the papers you signed. I heard every time you said, 'Tomorrow I will change.' The tragedy was not only that you deceived us. Eventually, you taught yourself that your own words meant nothing. Long before you reached this day, I knew where that road ended.

"You now have only minutes left. The men outside will show no mercy. I cannot bear the thought that my only son will be dragged into the street and murdered like an animal.

"Go upstairs to the small attic room. You will find a strong rope hanging from the beam and a chair beneath it. Lock the door. Better that you meet your end alone, with a measure of dignity, than in the hands of those men.

"Your brokenhearted father."

The son read the letter twice.

For the first time, the fantasy collapsed. His father had known. His father had seen every step. Every warning that the son had dismissed had been a description of this very afternoon.

He looked through the curtain again. One of the creditors pointed to the clock.

The son climbed the stairs.

Each step carried a memory. Here his mother had knelt to tie his shoe. Here his father had stood on the night the boy first came home late. Here he had shouted, "I do not need you!" and slammed the door.

He reached the attic room. The rope was there. The chair was there.

And on the chair was a second envelope.



The Second Letter

"My beloved son,

"Before you do what I have instructed, there is one thing left for you to do.

"You are about to stand before your Creator. Do not enter the next world carrying lies. Confess what you have done. Speak honestly. Do not blame your friends. Do not blame your parents. Do not blame your disappointments. Say the truth.

"I have written a vidui for you on the pages enclosed. Read it slowly. Add your own words. Remember the pain you caused your mother. Remember the goodness you rejected. Remember the people you used. Remember the person you could have become.

"Then ask Hashem for forgiveness. Ask your mother for forgiveness. And if there remains one pure place in your heart, forgive me too.

"Your father, who never stopped loving you."

The son sat on the chair and began to read.

At first, he read quickly. There were only minutes left. But one sentence caught in his throat. Then another. The pages seemed to know him. They named not only his public failures, but the private dishonesty beneath them: the excuses, the ingratitude, the arrogance, the years of taking love for granted.

He began again.

This time, he read slowly.

"Ashamnu. I have been guilty."

He remembered his mother's porch light.

"Bagadnu. I have betrayed."

He remembered his father offering him another chance.

"Gazalnu. I have taken what was not mine."

He remembered every loan he had obtained through a promise he knew he could not keep.

For the first time in years, he did not explain himself. He did not negotiate with the truth. He did not say, "Yes, but." He said, "Yes. I did this."

Then he spoke his own words.

"Ribbono Shel Olam, I have wasted everything. I wasted my parents' love. I wasted their trust. I wasted my name. I wasted the life You gave me. I do not deserve another chance. But if there is forgiveness beyond the life I have ruined, please forgive me."

He pictured his mother. "Mama, you waited for me every Friday night. I knew you were waiting, and I did not come. Please forgive me."

He pictured his father. "Tatte, every warning was love, and I called it hatred. Every boundary was protection, and I called it control. You knew where I was going, and I refused to see. Please forgive me."

The clock downstairs began to strike three.

The son stood on the chair. He placed the rope around his neck. He was not thinking about the creditors anymore. He was not thinking about money. He was thinking only one thought: if I had one more day, I would live differently.

Then he pushed the chair away.



The Third Letter

The rope tightened. The beam groaned. Suddenly, the ceiling above him cracked. A section of plaster collapsed. The beam gave way, and the son fell hard to the floor beneath a shower of dust and broken wood.

He lay stunned, gasping for air.

Then something struck the floor beside him: a third envelope.

He tore it open.

“My beloved son,

“If you are reading this letter, then you are alive.

“The rope was never strong enough to take your life. The ceiling was prepared to open. I did not bring you into this room in order for you to die. I brought you here to discover whether the person you had become was finally prepared to die.

“If you stood on that chair only because you feared the men outside, nothing has changed. But if you confessed honestly; if you saw the pain you caused; if you accepted that your old life could no longer continue; if your final thought was that you would live differently if only you had another day — then, my son, you have done teshuvah.

“And now you have another day.

“Hashem does not desire the death of the sinner. He desires that the sinner return from his path and live.

“Go to the back garden. Beneath the old apple tree, three paces from the stone bench, you will find an iron chest. In it there is enough money to pay every debt, rebuild an honest life, establish a Jewish home, and help others who have lost their way.

“Do not use the treasure to resume the life that brought you here. That life ended in this room.

“My son, I was never preparing you to die. I was preparing you to live.

“Your father.”

The son held the letter against his heart and cried.

Outside, the creditors pounded on the front door. The caretaker had arrived. Voices rose. But the son was no longer frantic. He walked into the garden, counted three paces from the stone bench, dug beneath the apple tree, and found the iron chest.

He paid every debt, but it was not simple. The chest gave him the means; it did not do the work. He had to find people he had avoided, face men he feared, examine old accounts, and surrender money he once would have spent on himself. Some people accepted payment without a word. Some demanded an apology. Some did not trust him even after they were paid. He learned that restitution can begin in an afternoon, but rebuilding a name can take years.

But that was only the beginning. He returned money he had obtained dishonestly. He asked forgiveness from people he had humiliated. He left the companions who had helped him destroy himself. He found teachers. He learned. He married. He built a home in which the Shabbos table was never treated as a prison, because he now understood it as a place of belonging.

In time, people forgot the reckless young man he had been. They knew a generous, serious Jew who had unusual patience for people in trouble. When someone's child was wandering, he never spoke with contempt. He knew that a Jewish soul can travel very far and still remember the way home.

And every year, on his father's yahrzeit, he read all three letters.



The First Letter We Have Already Opened

My friends, tonight we enter the house.

For an entire year, we have searched for treasure in all the usual rooms. We searched in work, purchases, recognition, distraction, winning arguments, being right, being admired, being needed. Some of those things are necessary. Some are good. But none can answer the final questions of a life.

Tonight, the Father's first letter is waiting in plain sight.

We have just said Kol Nidrei. Kol Nidrei is not a magic eraser for money we owe, promises made to another person, or damage we have never tried to repair. Yom Kippur does not excuse us from facing the people we have injured. But Kol Nidrei has forced us to hear again the gravity of words. A neder binds because words matter. A promise matters because the person who speaks it is meant to mean it.

The son's destruction did not begin with the rope in the attic. It began each time he said, "I promise," merely to end a conversation. Every promise relieved the pressure of the moment while making the next promise less believable.

Eventually, he did not merely lose his parents' trust. He lost trust in himself. Kol Nidrei asks us tonight: Have my words become instruments of truth, or have I been using words to purchase one more day without changing?

The ancient words we have just chanted cannot substitute for keeping our word. They are meant to awaken us to its holiness. Having declared Kol Nidrei, we must now recognize what our speech has created. Which “tomorrow” did I never honor? Which apology did I promise but never offer? Which change did I announce because announcing it was easier than beginning it?

There is also a custom to recite Tefillah Zakkah before Kol Nidrei. But I know what Erev Yom Kippur looks like. There are children to settle, a seudah to finish, traffic, parking, seats to find, and a race against the clock. Some people did not have time to say it. Others said it quickly. And even those who said every word may welcome the chance to hear a few of its words again, slowly, together.

Tefillah Zakkah does not speak vaguely about having made mistakes. It takes an inventory of the human body. Hashem gave me a mind and a heart with which to think holy thoughts. He gave me eyes with which to see holiness, ears with which to hear words of Torah, a mouth with which to speak truth and prayer, hands with which to perform mitzvos, and feet with which to run toward what is good. What did I do with them?

The prayer says: “Ki b’eileh ha’eivarim v’hachushim shechanantani bahem, uv’koach hachayim shehishpata aleihem tamid, bahem nishtamashti la’asos hara b’einecha v’la’avor al retzonecha.”

“With these limbs and senses with which You favored me, and with the power of life You continually bestowed upon them, I used them to do what was evil in Your eyes and to transgress Your will.”

That is true regret. Not merely, “I made some poor decisions.” You gave me a body. You gave me abilities. You gave me another year of life flowing through them every moment—and I sometimes used Your own gifts to move farther away from You. Tefillah Zakkah makes us look at the gift of life before Yom Kippur asks us what we will now do with it.

And then Tefillah Zakkah turns from the sins committed through our bodies to the injuries that remain between one person and another. It says: “Hineni mochel b’mechilah gemurah l’chol mi shechata k’negdi ... v’lo ye’anesh shum adam b’sibasi. U’k’shem she’ani mochel l’chol adam, kein titein es cheini b’einei kol adam sheyimchelu li b’mechilah gemurah.”

“I hereby forgive with complete forgiveness everyone who has sinned against me ... and may no person be punished because of me. And just as I forgive every person, so may You grant me favor in the eyes of every person, that they too may forgive me completely.”

The prayer then asks us to review our lives without excuses, to confess while there is still time, and to confront the possibility that life is not guaranteed. It asks us to speak tonight with the honesty we would have if this were our final vidui. Not because we seek death, chas veshalom, but because we refuse to assume that there will always be another opportunity.

Before we ask Hashem to release us, we loosen our grip on the people we have kept imprisoned in our anger.

That is not easy. Some wounds are deep. Forgiveness does not mean pretending that evil was good. It does not require returning to an unsafe relationship. It does not erase accountability. But it means that on the night when I ask the Ribbono Shel Olam not to define me forever by my worst moment, I must ask whether I am prepared to stop defining somebody else forever by theirs.

The first letter says: My child, I knew where the road was going.

Hashem is not surprised by the person who entered shul tonight. He knew about the promise we made last Yom Kippur. He knew how long it lasted. He knew about the anger, the words, the private compromises, the hours lost, the relationships neglected, and the opportunities postponed. He knew every time we said, "Tomorrow."

And still He left us a letter.

The first letter is not evidence that the Father gave up on the son. It is evidence that the Father was waiting for the son to become honest.



The Second Letter Is the Day Itself

Now we enter the avodah of Yom Kippur.

For twenty-four hours, we live as though these were our final twenty-four hours. The five inuyim quiet the body's ordinary demands. Not because the body is evil. The body is a holy instrument, entrusted to us by Hashem. But all year long, its appetite is loud. "Feed me. Entertain me. Impress them. Protect my pride. Make me comfortable." For one day, the soul answers, "Please be quiet. There is something I need to say."

If you knew you were leaving this world tomorrow night, would you complain about the seat you were given? Would you remain offended because someone failed to greet you properly? Would you spend precious minutes reviewing somebody else's faults?

Or would you finally speak honestly?

Ashamnu. Bagadnu. We say the words again and again, not because Hashem forgot the first vidui, but because we forgot it. We confess at Maariv, Shacharis, Mussaf, Minchah, and Ne'ilah. We knock gently against the heart. We return to the same alphabet of failure until it stops being a list about humanity and becomes a confession about me.

The second letter does not allow the son to blame the creditors. Yes, they are dangerous. Yes, his friends influenced him. Yes, his childhood contained pain. But no human being becomes free by surrendering authorship of his life.

Teshuvah begins when “They made me” becomes “I chose.” When “That is just how I am” becomes “That is how I have behaved.” When “Nothing can change” becomes “I can take the next step.”

The Rambam describes one of the paths of teshuvah: “Umeshaneh shemo — he changes his name,” meaning, “Ani acher ve’eini oso ha’ish she’asah osan hama’asim — I am another person; I am not the same person who committed those deeds.”

The Rambam is not describing a legal trick. He is describing the deepest possibility of Yom Kippur. **A human being is not a finished object.** I am responsible for everything I have done, but I am not sentenced to remain forever the person who did it.

The son stands on the chair. But he does not merely stand there. He does not merely read the letter, cry, confess, and promise that someday he will change. He kicks the chair away.

For us, the chair is symbolic. No one is being asked to harm himself. The Torah forbids it, and everything in the story is designed to save life. But every one of us has an identity that needs to come down from the beam: the person who must always be right; the person who will never apologize first; the person who says, “At my age I cannot change”; the person who performs Judaism but has stopped speaking to Hashem; the person whose public image is polished while a private relationship is collapsing.

We say strange things when our pride is threatened. “I would rather die than apologize to him.” “I would rather die than admit that she was right.” “I would rather die than ask for help.” “I would rather die than make that telephone call.” “I would rather die than give that much tzedakah.” “I would rather die than surrender this resentment after everything that person did to me.”

Of course we do not mean actual death. But at that moment, some part of us feels that giving in would be a kind of death. My ego would die. My image of myself would die. The identity I have defended for years would no longer be able to continue unchanged.

That is the mesirus nefesh Yom Kippur asks of us—not, chas veshalom, the destruction of the body Hashem gave us, but the surrender of the false self that has been ruling that body. **Hashem does not ask us to die. He asks us to be willing to let the part that is destroying our life die.**

Which self must not leave shul tomorrow night? What is the chair that you must kick away this Yom Kippur?

Do not answer with ten things. One is enough. Name one pattern that cannot continue unchanged. One conversation you must have. One boundary you must establish. One mitzvah you must rescue from habit. One person to whom you must return. One secret compromise that must stop being negotiated.

Perhaps your chair is the apology you have rehearsed but refused to deliver. Perhaps it is the help you know you need but have been too ashamed to request. Perhaps it is money you must return or tzedakah you know you should give. Perhaps it is the first soft word in a home where everyone is waiting for somebody else to speak first. Perhaps it is accepting that you cannot control another person. Perhaps it is finally saying to Hashem, "I cannot continue living this way."

Standing on the chair is regret. Reading the second letter is vidui. Crying on the chair may be sincere. But teshuvah cannot end with standing on the chair and promising that one day we will jump. At some point, the foot must move.

Kick the chair.

If the act can be done during Yom Kippur—through honest vidui, forgiveness, prayer, or an inward decision—do it today. If it requires a telephone, money, travel, or another person, make the decision irreversible today and perform it immediately after Yom Kippur. Say the words, "I was wrong," without adding, "but you were also wrong." Ask for the help. End the secret arrangement. Put the boundary in place. Take the step that your old self insists it cannot survive.

And then discover the truth: you will not die.

You will apologize, and you will still be alive. You will admit that you were wrong, and you will still be alive. You will ask for help, and you will still be alive. You will loosen your grip on the resentment, and you will still be alive. Something false may die. Something destructive may die. But the person Hashem created you to become will begin to live.

And if we refuse? Then the creditors remain outside the house. In the nimshal, those creditors are the bad middos, the habits, the appetites, the resentments, the dishonesty, and the broken promises that have pursued us into another Yom Kippur. If we leave the chair exactly where it was, they will be waiting when Yom Kippur ends.

They may not kill the body. But they can collect another year of our lives.

Anger collects from a marriage. Pride collects from our children. Envy collects from our peace of mind. An addiction collects from our health and dignity. Dishonesty collects from our name. Indifference collects from our neshamah. The creditors take their payment slowly, one day at a time.

Better to let one destructive part of me die tonight than to allow it to consume another year of my life.

If we knew we had only twenty-four hours, we would not prepare a strategic plan for spiritual perfection. We would tell the truth. We would choose what matters

most. We would take one irreversible step toward life. Some chairs can be kicked away during Yom Kippur itself: by forgiving, confessing honestly, surrendering an excuse, or making a decision that is no longer open for negotiation. Other acts must be performed as soon as the day ends. But before Ne'ilah, the decision must become real.

That is the second letter.



The Third Letter Is Already Waiting

And now, at the beginning of Yom Kippur, I want to tell you the ending, because no one should continue into this day believing that Hashem is waiting for us to fall.

The third letter is already in the ceiling.

The Navi Yechezkel gives us its words: “Chai ani, ne’um Hashem Elokim, im echpotz b’mos harasha, ki im beshuv rasha midarko vechayah — As I live, declares Hashem, I do not desire the death of the wicked person, but that the wicked person return from his way and live.”

Return — and live.

Not return and remain humiliated forever. Not return and spend the rest of life staring at the wreckage. Return and live.

Hashem does not ask the sinner to die. He asks the destructive life to end.

The rope was not there to end the son’s life. It was there to bring him home.

Now we understand why the third letter could not be handed to the son while he was still standing safely on the chair. As long as he held on to the possibility of returning to his old life, he was not ready to receive the treasure. The third letter fell only after he kicked the chair—only after he became willing to lose the life that was destroying him.

Tomorrow, as the day moves toward Ne'ilah, the gates will appear to be closing. We will say, “Pesach lanu sha’ar b’eis ne’ilas sha’ar — open a gate for us at the time when the gate is closing.” In the mashal, at the very moment one door seems to close, a concealed ceiling opens. That is Ne'ilah. The gate closes on the year that was. Another passage opens into the life that can be.

Chazal ask in Maseches Kiddushin about the words, “Banim atem laHashem Elokeichem — You are children to Hashem your God.” Rabbi Meir teaches: “Bein kach uvein kach atem keruyin banim — either way, you are called children.” Chazal point to the Torah’s own descriptions: foolish children, faithless children, destructive children—and still the word is children.

Hashem may reject the sin, judge the act, and demand that we change. But He does not cancel the relationship. He does not stop calling us His children.

That is the deepest meaning of the father's third letter. The son's behavior became intolerable, but his sonship was never revoked. Teshuvah does not persuade Hashem to begin loving us. Teshuvah allows us to stop running from the love that never left.

At the end of Yom Kippur, we will cry out, "Shema Yisrael." We will declare, "Hashem Hu HaElokim." And then we will hear the shofar.

What does that shofar say?

It does not merely announce that the fast is over. It announces that the son is alive.

You entered the house. You read the letters. You stood before the truth. The chair has fallen. The ceiling has opened. And the Father says: **My child, I was never preparing you to die. I was preparing you to live.**

That is why the moments after Yom Kippur matter so much. The third letter does not say, "You survived; now return to the old life." It says, "There is treasure in the garden. Pay your debts. Repair what you broke. Build a home. Use what I give you to become a source of life for others."

The treasure is not a guarantee that every financial problem disappears or that every illness is healed. The treasure is the possibility of becoming the person Hashem created us to become. It is another day with which to make a phone call. Another morning to put on tefillin with attention. Another Friday night to sit at the table. Another chance to say, "I was wrong." Another opportunity to be patient with a struggling child. Another year in which the porch light can remain on and someone can still come home.



What We Must Do Tonight

So now, after Kol Nidrei and before we begin Maariv, I ask each of us to do three things.

First, open the first letter. Stop being surprised by where a road leads. We know which habit is damaging us. We know which relationship is weakening. We know which excuse has become too polished. Say it privately to Hashem: "You knew, and now I know too."

Second, enter the twenty-four hours. Imagine, with complete seriousness, that these are the final twenty-four hours of your life. Not to become morose. Not to become frightened. To become clear. Daven as you would daven if there were no tomorrow. Listen as you would listen. Forgive as you would forgive. Say vidui as you would say it if there would never be another opportunity.

Third, identify the chair. Decide now that if Hashem gives you life tomorrow night, you will not treat that life as an automatic continuation. Choose the one act that feels almost impossible: the apology, the repayment, the request for help, the surrender of pride, the end of a destructive practice. Do not merely stand on the chair thinking about it. Kick it away. Let that decision tell Heaven and tell yourself that a new person will walk out of this room.

Perhaps it is a fixed time for Torah. Perhaps it is a repaired relationship. Perhaps it is help for an addiction or a struggle that cannot be defeated alone. Asking for help is not weakness; it is choosing life. Perhaps it is a change in the atmosphere of your home. Perhaps it is finally paying what you owe, returning what is not yours, or apologizing without explaining why the other person was also wrong.

Make it concrete. Make it small enough to begin and important enough to matter.

My dear friends, we are not trapped in the house. We are not abandoned. We are not too late.

The Father knew where we were going, and He arranged a way back before we arrived.

The first letter is honesty.

The second letter is teshuvah.

The third letter is life.

Tonight we open the first. During these sacred hours, we will read the second with our tears, our fasting, our vidui, and our tefillos. Tomorrow at Ne'ilah, when our strength is almost gone and the gates seem to be closing, the ceiling will open. And when the shofar sounds, we will hear the message that was waiting for us all along:

My child, you are alive.

Do not return to the road that brought you here.

Go home. Pay your debts. Repair what you broke. Build what you were born to build. Take the treasure of another year and use it well.

Ribbono Shel Olam, we have entered Your house. We have found Your letters. Give us the courage to read them honestly. Give us the strength to let an old life end without allowing hope to end with it. Open for us a gate when the gates are closing. And write and seal all of us, together with all of Klal Yisrael, in the Sefer HaChayim — for a year of goodness, blessing, forgiveness, healing, and true life.

G'mar chasimah tovah.

Source Notes

The central story is an expanded adaptation of a mashal told in the name of the Dubno Maggid. The original has not been located in the Maggid's printed works. A related anonymous version, titled "Hatzalah Kefulah," appears in the Dirshu booklet for Parashas Eikev, pages 30-31, citing "Sippurim MehaChayim 7." The adaptation in this drush deliberately changes and expands the narrative and should not be presented as a verbatim text of the Dubno Maggid.

Primary Torah sources quoted or invoked: Yechezkel 33:11; Kiddushin 36a, the teaching of Rabbi Meir, "Bein kach uvein kach atem keruyin banim"; Rambam, Hilchos Teshuvah 2:4; the five inuyim of Yom Kippur, Mishnah Yoma 8:1; the rule that Yom Kippur does not atone for wrongs between people until the injured person is appeased, Mishnah Yoma 8:9; Tefillah Zakkah for Erev Yom Kippur; and the Ne'ilah passage "Pesach lanu sha'ar b'eis ne'ilas sha'ar."