

Yearning to Return Reflections on Yom Kippur



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Edited by Yikrat Friedman

Yearning to Return
REFLECTIONS ON YOM KIPPUR

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Reflections on Yom Kippur

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*In memory of my father and teacher
whose soul departed in purity
on the 23rd of the month of Cheshvan 5778
and who took his leave from this world in peace.*



לעילוי נשמת
אברהם בן יחזקאל ז"ל
גלב"ע ו' סיון תשס"ט
תנצב"ה

הונצח ע"י בני משפחתו



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Introduction

Never were there more joyous days for the people of Israel than the fifteenth of Av and Yom Kippur, for on these days the maidens of Jerusalem used to go out dressed in white garments – borrowed ones, in order not to cause shame to those who did not have their own.... The maidens of Jerusalem would go out and dance in the vineyards, saying: Young men, lift up your eyes and behold whom you are about to choose for yourself. Regard not beauty alone, but rather consider a virtuous family, for “gracefulness is deceitful and beauty is vain” (Proverbs 31:30).

Mishna Taanit 4:8

The mishna in Taanit teaches that the most joyous days on the Jewish calendar are the fifteenth of Av and Yom Kippur. On both of these days, a woman yearns to return. She yearns for a response in return from the man she seeks, and she yearns for the return back to God. These are the two days in which the verse “I have found the one that my soul seeks” (Song of Songs 3:4) resounds in the open air.

On Yom Kippur, we ask God to seal our names in the book of life, like the seal the lover seeks in the Song of Songs: “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is as fierce as death” (3:4).

On these two days we ask to lift up and to be uplifted. On the fifteenth of Av the maidens say, “Young man, lift up your eyes and behold whom you are about to choose.” And on Yom Kippur we pray in the *Ne’ila* service, “We implore you, please, O God, lift up in forbearance, forgive.”

These are two days of abundant love, perhaps the greatest festivals on the Jewish calendar. On these two days we achieve closeness by forging paths of connection to one another. Only when we forge these paths and atone

for our trespasses will we be able to pave the way to the union of bride and groom, to the union of the Holy One, blessed be He, and the Divine Presence, to a great love that emanates from shattered tablets.

These are two days with mortal stakes, days on which the account ledgers are opened, days on which there is no man or woman, young or old, who does not yearn to return to God and to receive the response that God gave to Moses after the shattering of the tablets: “I have forgiven, as you requested” (Num. 14:20).

Over the course of the year we continue to question and doubt one another’s virtues, which makes it impossible to return. We cannot return with these questions still open; we can only return in responsiveness to one other. The time has come, once and for all, for the people of Israel to stop demanding an accounting from one another, and to start holding ourselves accountable to God.

We are allowed to ask questions, but it is far more important to yearn for a response in return, because returning is the overture of love.

This book may be regarded as a collection of all the questions that are forever being asked. It is not a textbook

about returning to God in repentance. It need not be read from start to finish. Wherever you open the book, the gates of repentance will open before you.

As we say in the *Ne'ila* prayer, "The day will fade. The sun will set and be gone. We will come in through Your gates." The book is an attempt to find our way in. Together, we will try to forge a path to forgiveness before the hour when the gates are locked.

As we recite in the afternoon service on Yom Kippur, we have come to a place of fire, flare, and flame. And many waters cannot extinguish this love.

Hineni. Here I stand, deficient in deeds, yearning to return alongside you.

Yemima Mizrachi
Jerusalem, Elul 5778



Part I
Bearing Iniquity





My Longing, My God, Is for You

Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra¹

My longing, my God, is for You
My desire and love is for You
My heart and innards are Yours
My soul and breath are Yours.
My arms and legs are Yours,
My character is from you.
My bones and blood are Yours
My skin and my body

¹ Translated by Abigail Denmark Ossip, with advisory support from Dr. Jonathan Decter, <https://www.abbiedoespiyyut.com/Lecha Eli Teshukati t.html>.



My eyes and thoughts are Yours
 My shape and my form
My spirit and strength are Yours
 My trust and my hope is You
My heart, blood, and fat are Yours
 Like the sheep I sacrifice, my offering
To You, the One with no second
 My only soul will acknowledge You
Yours is kingship, majesty Yours
 My praise befits You
Help in troubled times comes from You
 Be my help in the time of my trouble
My hope when I tremble is to You
 When I sigh like a woman giving birth
I hope to You, heal my fracture
 My pain and my wounds
I long, without quieting, for You
 Until You illuminate my darkness
Eternity is Yours, I trust in You
 My strength is You
I call to You, I cling to You
 Until I return to my land
While I still live I am Yours
 And even after my death



I admit and confess before You
 For my sins and my wickedness
My salvation is Yours, forgive my wickedness
 My crimes and my guilt
I bow and spread my hands to You
 Please hear my supplication
I cry with a downtrodden heart to You
 With my many complaints and my grief
Kindness is Yours, mercy Yours
 Have mercy on all my hardship
My sin is too great to bear
 My lapses too large
Therefore my pains are great
 My planting falls short
And alas! Woe is me
 If You judge me according to my wickedness
My inclination is my constant enemy
 Like an adversary against me
I was advised and tempted by it
 With devices toward my evil ways
To Him, and none but Him
 My anger and complaints
And when into my heart ascend
 My sins, as I lie in bed



I am afraid, I tremble too
 My confusion increases
I am agitated when I mention
 My sins before You
I stand naked before You
 What will my answer be
On the day my deceptions testify against me
 I will eat the fruit of my actions
The days of payment will come
 The time of punishment draws near
When I hear your tidings
 I quake and fear very much
Who can stand before You
 And who can be my exchange
How can I give an account to You
 How can I be righteous in my claim
I am ashamed and I have ambushed
 I have betrayed and I am scorned
I have stolen and I have robbed
 I have become evil and wicked
I have also been rebellious and corrupt
 I have sinned and caused others to sin
I have strayed and I have advised wrongly
 I have deceived and I have denied



I have mocked and I have scorned
 I have rebelled and I have defied
I have spurned and committed adultery
 I have been stubborn and I have exceeded limits
I have distorted and caused distortion
 I have sinned and I have become blemished
I have been hostile and I have caused pain
 I have cursed and I have gone wrong
I have been evil and I have been corrupt
 I have been abominable and made mistakes
And I have left your path
 And my shame has covered me
I have increasingly done evil
 And continued in my evilness
And I have lied and I have been treacherous
 I have extorted and I have oppressed
I sinned at my beginning
 And I was evil at my end
I was guilty in my youth
 And I rebelled in my old age
I have loathed Your teachings
 And have chosen my own teachings
I have abandoned Your will
 And I have followed my desire



I have fulfilled my inclination's will
 And I have not considered my end
I have added many sins
 To my wickedness and my guilt
Therefore my face is covered
 By my shame and my embarrassment
I have no refuge but You
 My forgiveness comes from You
There is no pardoner but You
 My pardon comes from You
If You bring Your servant to judgment
 What is my might worth
What am I, what is my life,
 What is my strength and my power
Like blowing chaff driven away
 How will You remember my mistakes
I have become mute and ashamed
 And my shame has covered me
I will always ask for Your favor
 To grant my requests
And wash me thoroughly
 From my iniquities and my sins
See my great distress
 And my helplessness in my exile



Please do not hide Your ear
 From my sighing and crying out
Your servant is also an advocate for good
 Please say “Enough” to my troubles
Show me Your salvation
 Before the day I die
And the day I fall into my enemies’ trap
 Support me in my falling
My soul is sated with wormwood
 Making me weary of my life
Display for me a sign for good
 And rise to my aid
For You are my portion
 My joyful cry and my good
My fate and my praise
 All my joy and happiness
My heart’s exultation, the light of my eyes
 My strength and my desire
My rest and my delight
 My quietness and my serenity
Teach me to understand Your service
 My service will be to You
Return to me and I will return
 And You will desire my repentance



Show me Your ways
 And straighten my path
And You will hear my prayer
 And You will answer my supplication
I have sought You wholeheartedly
 Answer me, God, with what I seek
I pour out my tears to You
 Wipe away my sins as I cry
My soul says, “My portion
 God is my inheritance”
Please gather up my sins
 In Your kindness on the day I am gathered up
And the day I walk before You
 Please accept my walking
And with those who do Your will
 Place the reward for my actions
And send the angels of favor
 And let them go out to me
And they will say, “Come in peace”
 With one voice when I arrive
Let them bring me to Your Garden of Eden
 And let my dwelling be there
And I will enjoy Your light
 And place my honor in my resting place

My Longing, My God, Is for You



The light hidden before You
Will be my protection and my shelter
And under the shade of Your wings
Please give me my place.



Wander the Streets

“Wander the streets of Jerusalem,” says the prophet. “If you can find but one person who seeks faith, I will forgive the city” (Jer. 5:1).

This verse is a reminder of an aspect of Yom Kippur that is generally overlooked. Master of the Universe, I hereby proclaim before You that every year during the week before Yom Kippur I wander the streets of Jerusalem and the streets of Tel Aviv and the streets of countless other cities, and what I discover is nothing short of wondrous. You look for one person who seeks faithfulness? I see sanctuaries filled to the brim. People gather; they make their way from lectures on spirituality to *Selichot* services, and the streets of the city resemble a great big pajama



party. Everyone is out in the streets, men and women alike, and what are they all searching for? Faith. Everyone shares the same aspiration, and everyone inclines their heads toward the same heaven. And we too seek faith, because there is nothing greater. As the prophet teaches, so long as the people have faith, God will forgive the city.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev (1740–1809) frequently emphasized this point in his ardent words about his fellow Jews. Several stories about Rabbi Levi Yitzchak take place on the eve of Yom Kippur, with the whole community gathered in the synagogue awaiting the arrival of their rabbi to begin the *Kol Nidrei* prayer. Here is one story of many:

It happened once that Rabbi Levi Yitzhak came to the beit midrash on the night of Yom Kippur. He paced to and fro, but did not begin the recitation of Kol Nidrei. At the same time, he noticed a man sitting on the ground in the corner, crying.

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak said to him, “Why do you cry so?”

The man replied: “Rabbi, how can I not cry? Yesterday I had everything, and today I am forlorn,



and lacking everything. Lest the rabbi think that I did not behave properly, it is not so. I sat in my village, and whoever came to my door, I gave him food and drink, and whoever came to me hungry went away satiated. And my wife would behave with even more kindness than I. She would walk around the village to see if there was anywhere a poor Jew who needed to be fed.

“And now, the One above came and took my wife from me, and she died. And if this were not enough, He burned down my house, so that I am left bereft of my wife and with no home. And I have six small children. I also had a large siddur with all the *piyyutim* (liturgical poems) and prayers marked so that I did not have to turn the pages to find a single prayer. This too was burned. So how can I forgive Him?”

Immediately, the rabbi ordered him to search the *beit midrash* for a similar siddur. He searched and found one. The man sat and turned page after page to see if this siddur was ordered like the one that had been burned. It took him about an hour, and during that entire time the rabbi stood and waited.



Finally the rabbi said to him, “Now can you forgive God?”

The man answered, “Now I can forgive Him.”

Then the rabbi approached the pulpit and began to recite *Kol Nidrei*.¹

This story moves me to tears, because so many men and women have lost their faith after suffering loss. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev explains that yes, there are losses that cannot be restored. It is impossible to bring back a father or mother. People suffer loss and they lose faith. But if they have a prayer book, then they have a way of connecting with God, and they can forgive God for their losses. They can plead with God, “Do not cast me out of Your presence, or take Your holy spirit away from me” (Ps. 51:13).

“Will the prayer book bring you comfort?” Rabbi Levi Yitzchak asked that Jew, because the prayer book represents our connection with God. “The prayer book

¹ From Simcha Raz, *Loving and Beloved: Tales of Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, Defender of Israel* (Menorah Books, 2016).



brings me comfort,” the man responded, and then the Yom Kippur prayers could begin.

All of us have suffered losses in the year that has passed. But we must not lose our connection with God as well. We must plead with God to remain inside of us. We must cry out, “Let me again rejoice in Your salvation” (Ps. 51:14).

During the Ten Days of Repentance, we are like sleepwalkers in the night, all seeking connection. Each year I see so many people who are trying to connect to God. There are so many women who come to my classes in search of religious connection. No one asked them to show up. They were drawn by their own yearning to rejoice in a connection with God once again.