

## Underlying Values and Concepts of Yom Kippur

by Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel | October 2, 2019

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*(Please note that many of the ideas in this chapter were derived from oral lectures by Rabbi Yissachar Frand.)*

Yom Kippur is the holiest day on the Jewish calendar, quite different from all other days of the year for Jews. Nearly all waking hours are spent in the synagogue, food is forbidden and other restrictions apply to this unique day. This chapter will attempt to explore the ideas, feelings and values of the day, and the concept of repentance, that make Yom Kippur so special. Rather than examine the prayers, laws and customs themselves, the purpose is to understand the deeper concepts and their underlying values.

### **THE KOL NIDRE PRAYER AND ITS UNIQUENESS**

Unlike any other Jewish holiday, where the Jewish day (and thus the holiday and its service) begins at nightfall, the Yom Kippur service must begin while it is still daylight, before Yom Kippur itself sets in, the very first prayer of Yom Kippur, Kol Nidre, must be recited and completed during the day, and not at night (not even during twilight after sunset).<sup>1</sup> What is so special about this prayer that makes it unique and full of awe? Whenever Jews who are totally removed from Judaism the rest of the year attend the synagogue for Kol Nidre, they seem “mesmerized” by this particular prayer. Moreover, Jews who normally sing different melodies with slightly different variations in their *Nusach*-prayer texts, all streams of Judaism have the same melody (*Nigun*) and text for Kol Nidre.

But what is it that makes this prayer is so special? Certainly, the content itself is not so awe-inspiring. It is more understandable that the *Unitane Tokef* prayer, recited the next day in the Musaf service should inspire awe, since it talks about who will live and who will die during the next year. But Kol Nidre seems like a very dry, technical, emotionless prayer. In actuality, the prayer is just a legal renunciation of vows that Jews may have taken during the past year, as well as those of the coming year, recited in the Aramaic language, which most Jews today do not even understand.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the very idea of Kol Nidre, the renunciation of vows, is a rite that has already been performed by most traditional Jews in a formal ceremony on the day before Rosh Hashana.<sup>3</sup> According to Jewish law, in fact, the Kol Nidre prayer may not even be relied upon as a legitimate renunciation of a personal vow anyway.<sup>4</sup> So what is so special about it?

One principle aspect of Kol Nidre is not the words renouncing vows, rather the words that must be said right before one’s vows are publicly annulled: Jews publicly request “permission” to pray along with all the sinners. These words are part of the service that must be uttered before Kol Nidre can even begin.<sup>5</sup> This is the only time that the community publicly acknowledges others in the community who are chronic sinners, and asks to pray along with them as equals. Thus, Kol Nidre is the one time during the year that the Jewish community shows through words its desire to be united, and the community is even required to try to be a cohesive unity before G-d by truly making an effort to do so. Everyone is

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<sup>1</sup> Rema on Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 519:1

<sup>2</sup> See text of Kol Nidre prayer found in Yom Kippur Machzor

<sup>3</sup> Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 228:16

<sup>4</sup> Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 211:1

<sup>5</sup> Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 619:1

included in the Yom Kippur prayers asking for forgiveness, even the sinners who normally are not in the synagogue and not part of the Jewish community all year long. This unity of purpose and unity of people make this prayer unique, which helps Jews enter the day with the proper feeling of awe and trepidation.

But there is something else that also makes this particular prayer itself unique and inspiring. One contemporary commentary says<sup>6</sup> that perhaps on a subconscious level, there is something unusual going on within a person during the Kol Nidre service. We know that generally there are two kinds of commandments, those between man and G-d and those between man and man. But vows and oaths involve a third, lesser known category of commandment, those between man and himself. Taking an oath requires giving one's word. What is a man's value if his word is meaningless? The rabbis are saying that when Jews come to Yom Kippur, they have to think about and stress this aspect of human existence – the relationship between man and himself. This entire day, symbolized by the Kol Nidre prayer, is all about an accounting that a person has to give about himself or herself.

### **A DAY OF VISITING YOURSELF**

Someone once described Yom Kippur as a day that a person visits himself or herself. For most people, it is a visit that is done very infrequently. If we think about it, how much time does each person actually spend alone with himself or herself? Most people are so occupied with "life" – i.e., getting up, going to the synagogue, to work, spending time with family and friends, maybe doing some Jewish learning, etc., that they have no time be exclusively with themselves. When do people have time just to think, to simply introspect? In the past, this activity sometimes occurred in the car, when driving. But with today's GPS, iPods and MP3 tapes all built into the car's speaker, in addition to the tens of radio stations available, there is little "quiet time." Of course, there is also the ubiquitous cell phone that can reach anyone with the push of a button or even a voice command. Therefore, the car no longer provides any alone time. The Baalei Mussar, those Jews whose existence was built upon moral growth and improved ethical values, used to spend considerable time each day just with their own thoughts, as did many Chassidim. Rabbi Nachman of Breslov wrote<sup>7</sup> that the only way a person can combine his or her thoughts and emotions is by spending time alone and judging one's actions.

But how does a person visit himself or herself on Yom Kippur? The main commandment on Yom Kippur to attain atonement is the act of confession, the act of admitting one's sins and iniquities.<sup>8</sup> Maimonides, in the very first paragraph of his Laws of Repentance, states that to achieve repentance, even punishment is not sufficient. One must confess one's sins.<sup>9</sup> But the verb for confession used by the both Maimonides and the verses in the Torah about confession<sup>10</sup> is not "*Levadot*," which signifies "to confess." Instead, the verb that is repeatedly used is in the reflexive form, "*Lehitvadot*," which indicates not mere confession but "to confess to oneself." So, too, the word "to pray", also part of the essence of Yom Kippur, is derived from the verb "*Lefalel*" which signifies "to judge." But the Hebrew word to pray is always used in the reflexive form, "*Lehitpalel*," which connotes "to judge oneself." Therefore, confessing on Yom Kippur is not merely admitting one's sins in front of G-d, but more importantly, confessing to oneself. "Who am I?" "What have I done or not done?" "Where can I improve?"

### **IS GUILT SOMETHING GOOD OR BAD?**

In the process of facing ourselves, each person has to deal with an emotion called guilt. From the Freudian perspective, guilt is considered almost a "dirty" word. Today, when children respond to a moral lecture by parents or an admonishment for poor behavior, they may say "Stop giving me a guilt trip!" People today, in general, do not want to deal with guilt. But this is not the Jewish way. People should feel guilty when they do not live up to what they are supposed to be doing. Why?

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<sup>6</sup> Mikdash Mordechai, Yom HaKippurim, page 303

<sup>7</sup> Likutei Eitzot, Erech Daat

<sup>8</sup> Pri Chadash on Orach Chaim 607

<sup>9</sup> Maimonides, Laws of Repentance 1:1

<sup>10</sup> Leviticus 26:40, Numbers 5:7

Guilt is a basic and necessary emotion. It is something that individuals should experience when they do not live up to what they are supposed to be doing. G-d in His infinite wisdom gave human beings the emotion called guilt, yet people might deny that emotion.

How does a human being deny guilt? He or she comes up with excuses. King Solomon already told us<sup>11</sup> that man constantly makes excuses for his iniquities and actions. People make justifications for every behavior. Man is so good at convincing himself that what he does wrong is actually right (in order to justify his actions), that he actually created a word for this repeated behavior – rationalization. People have excuses before they do something wrong, while they are doing something wrong and certainly after they did something wrong. All the excuses are created in order not to feel guilty. Rabbi Norman Lamm has called this the “*Aval-But*” syndrome. Joseph’s brothers said<sup>12</sup> that they were guilty of selling him to Egypt, prefaced by the word, “but”.... In a play on words in the book of Lamentations, it says “*Darchai Tziyon Aveilot*,”<sup>13</sup> which is normally translated as “the roads to Zion mourn.” But Rabbi Lamm translates it as the way of the people of Zion is *Aval-But*, that Jews are full of “buts” for their actions, justifying all wrong behavior and not feeling guilty. In fact, when Maimonides rules about the specific words needed for confession, he does not simply say that Jews must say “we sinned.” Rather, Jews must say “but we sinned”<sup>14</sup> or we sinned with “but,” making excuses for every wrong action in order to avoid feeling guilty.

Since the beginning of time, human beings have rationalized their behavior and provided excuses for their sins. Beginning with the very first sin in history, when Adam blamed Eve, who in turn blamed the serpent for the sin, all were guilty and gave excuses. Adam even blamed G-d for his sin – for having given him Eve in the first place.<sup>15</sup> Man has become a genius at inventing excuses and blaming others for his immoral behavior. It is literally the oldest excuse in the book, the Book of Genesis. In the second sin recorded in the Torah, the Targum Yonatan explains Cain’s answer of exactly what he said to Abel before killing him, which is not found in the Torah text.<sup>16</sup> Cain said to Abel that if there is no judge and no judgment, then there can be no retribution for any act, no reward and punishment in the world. Therefore, every action can be justified and nothing is ever wrong. That is how he justified and rationalized his crime of killing his brother. But why doesn’t the Torah itself tell us Cain’s specific excuse or rationalization for Abel’s murder? This is in order to teach us that there is always an excuse, and the specific argument Cain used is irrelevant. Man always rationalizes his behavior, but the details are irrelevant, not important to record.

The pattern has not changed much over the years. There is an excuse for every unethical action, even today – e.g., my wife, my husband, my environment are to blame. Throughout human history, people have always claimed “it is not my fault.” Even in an American court of law, there has been the phenomenon of the “Twinkie Defense,” where the lawyers for Dan White tried to use his change of diet to sugary foods as the cause of a depression that led to the murder of Harvey Milk. Others have used the “Pete Rose Disease” to exonerate themselves for crimes associated with gambling, and there is even a disease today called “It is Not My Fault Disease.” This is the greatest impediment to true repentance. To repent, to confess one’s sins, the person first must recognize that it is indeed his or her fault. The very first step in the Teshuva-repentance process is to recognize that the action was indeed a sin and it is the doer’s fault.

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<sup>11</sup> Ecclesiastes 7:29

<sup>12</sup> Genesis 42:21

<sup>13</sup> Lamentations 1:4

<sup>14</sup> Maimonides, Hilchot Teshuva 2:8

<sup>15</sup> Genesis 3:11-13

<sup>16</sup> Genesis 4:8 and Targum Yonatan commentary

The Talmud demonstrates this idea in the classic story of Eliezer ben Durdaya, who was the worst kind of sinner, and visited every prostitute in the world.<sup>17</sup> When one prostitute told him that he could not possibly repent, this “woke him up” to try to repent. But he blamed everything and everyone for his immoral ways. Then he summoned many elements of the Creation to help him repent (each one is interpreted as a symbol for some aspect in life by the commentaries), such as the mountains and valleys, then the heavens and the earth, then the sun, moon and stars. In the end, he finally realized that repentance required him to admit it was his fault alone, and only he could effect a change within himself. As he fully repented, he died and the Talmud then calls him “rabbi” Eliezer, to demonstrate that his atonement was complete.

Another story in the Talmud involves King David, who sent a man to the front lines (Uriah) , knowing he would be killed, and then David would be free to take his wife. Technically he did not do anything illegal, but it certainly was immoral, especially for a king and a spiritual person like David. The prophet castigates David when he asks “Why did you despise the commandment of G-d to do evil in His eyes?”<sup>18</sup> Then there is a space in the text before King David answers. One explanation is that that David realized he had a decision to make. Do I, the king, accept the prophet’s diatribe and admit my sin? What will it do to the name of the kingship? (“Do you know what the media will do with this?”) Should I protect the office? That is the reason for the pause. How does David respond? He says, “I have sinned to G-d.” No excuses. He admits his mistake. One commentary contrasts David’s response to accusation to that of King Saul, who was also accused of sin at an earlier time by not following the command to kill the entire nation of Amalek.<sup>19</sup> Saul responded by giving excuses: it’s the nation’s fault. Therefore, Saul was punished. By admitting his sin, King David showed remorse and was not punished.

The same concept can be found in the story of the prophet Jonah, whose unique adventure we read on Yom Kippur afternoon. When Jonah is on the boat with the non-Jews and the storm comes, everyone is praying to their own idol in order to be saved. Jonah, the only Jew, could have easily kept quiet and attributed the ship’s sinking to others or to idol worship. Instead, he gets up and announces to all the non-Jews: “It is because of me that this storm came and the ship is sinking.”<sup>20</sup> Even though I believe in the true G-d, this terrible situation is my fault.”

On Yom Kippur, Jews look in the mirror. They look at themselves. But there are two ways for an individual to look into the mirror. One person can look from a distance and say “Not too bad. We are pretty good people. We obey most of the Torah’s commandments, and we help out others many times. Compared to others, we are pretty great.” That is what Yonah could have said if he compared himself to the non-Jews on his boat. But Yom Kippur is not a time for a cursory look in the mirror. It is a time for each person to look very closely and see everything, all the blemishes, all the potential good that is absent. Only then can a Jew come to admit his or her shortcomings and begin the true process of judging oneself and confessing to oneself. That is the essence of the day.

#### **THE PERSON WHO TRIES TO DO THE COMMANDMENTS – WHAT IS HIS REPENTANCE?**

There are many Jews who earnestly try to fulfill the commandments every day of the year. These are often the most serious people in the synagogue on Yom Kippur. But what are these Jews doing in the synagogue on this day? What could they possibly have done that needs repentance? They try to keep all the Jewish laws and commandments throughout the year. They find time to learn Torah and help Jews in need. What could these people possibly need repentance for? Unfortunately, even Jews such as these often need to repent as much as or even more than those who do not perform all the commandments.

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<sup>17</sup> Avodah Zara 17a

<sup>18</sup> II Samuel 12:9-13

<sup>19</sup> Malbim commentary on II Samuel 12

<sup>20</sup> Jonah 1:5, 12

There is a Hebrew expression that is borrowed from the prophet Isaiah.<sup>21</sup> The words in Hebrew are “*Mitzvot anashim melumada*,” which is loosely translated as “rote human learning of commandments.” The prophet speaks about those people who draw close to G-d with their mouths and lips, but distance themselves with their hearts because their fear of G-d is only by rote. In short, these people, and probably most Jews who perform many commandments each day, are only “going through the motions” of Judaism, without any real feeling and commitment. They lack a sense of passion in their relationship with G-d.

For many well-intentioned Jews, the heightened feeling often reached during the Jewish holidays shortly fades into rote observance, sort of a conditioned response to the Jewish way of life. The monotony of day in, day out Jewish living during the rest of the year causes many Jews to pray without feeling and perform the ritual commandments without any passion or thought.

This issue was not the only mentioned by the prophets. It is something that the Torah also spoke about, and the rabbis chose to remind praying Jews by placing it in the daily prayers in one of the most basic prayers for all Jews – the Shema. In the second paragraph of the Shema prayer, Jews recite, “And these words, which I command you today, shall be upon your heart.”<sup>22</sup> Why “today,” when the actual commandment came 38 years before? Rashi and the Midrash answer that the commandments should never appear to a Jew as if they are old and unimportant, but rather as something new and exciting, as if they were received today.<sup>23</sup> Rashi also comments on a different verse using the word “today” – that each day, the commandments should appear as if they are new.<sup>24</sup> This is an important concept – i.e., that everything in Judaism should be felt as if it were given today for the first time – performed with the same freshness and excitement as it was the very first time each commandment was fulfilled.<sup>25</sup> But why put this verse in the Shema of all places? And why is it so important to keep each Jewish action so fresh?

On the most basic level, we know that anything done for the first time is always more exciting. The first day of school, the first time a person drives a car, there is enthusiasm. It is great. It does not feel like an obligation, but the privilege that it should be. A twentieth century rabbi, Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner, suggested a deeper explanation.<sup>26</sup> The obligation of a Jew to keep his or her Judaism “new” and fresh is based on the obligation to imitate G-d and be like Him.<sup>27</sup> If an individual looks attentively at the world, there seems to be a constancy to it. There is predictability because it seems so repetitive. Every day the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. The stars come out at the exact predictable moment. When one looks at nature, it is the same thing, day in, day out. But this, in reality, is all an illusion. Judaism believes that every day is a brand new beginning. The sun will rise in the east tomorrow, but only if G-d decides tonight that it should. Just because it has done so countless times before, does not signify or guarantee that it will happen again. If person throws something upwards, it falls to the ground because of gravity. But based on the words recited each day in the daily prayers,<sup>28</sup> the believing Jew understands that the laws of gravity are not necessarily “destined” to continue. Each day, G-d decides whether to renew or not to renew the Creation and the laws of nature, including the laws of gravity. If G-d did not want it to happen, it would not happen. Thus, G-d is a *Mechadesh-Creator Anew*. It may look the same. It may look repetitive. But that is not what it actually is.

## **MAN SHOULD IMITATE G-D**

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<sup>21</sup> Isaiah 29:13 with Metzudat Dovid commentary

<sup>22</sup> Deuteronomy 6:6

<sup>23</sup> Rashi commentary and Midrash Sifri Va-etchanan on Deuteronomy 6:6

<sup>24</sup> Deuteronomy 26:16 and Rashi commentary

<sup>25</sup> Berachot 63b

<sup>26</sup> Pachad Yitzchak, Igrot Umichtavim 74

<sup>27</sup> Exodus 15:2, Shabbat 133b

<sup>28</sup> Blessing before the Shema in the morning prayers

One of the fundamental principles for the Jew is to imitate G-d, as it says in the Torah to “follow His ways.” But the Talmud asks<sup>29</sup> how can a mortal human being imitate the Almighty, Who is not seen and has no physical form? It answers that Jews should imitate G-d’s values, behavior and characteristics as reflected in the Torah. In that vein, the Jew should take actions that seem to be repetitive every day or every week – like prayers, Shabbat, blessings on food – and make them fresh and new, just like G-d does with His world. Since each day is brand new for G-d, each time a Jew performs a repetitive Torah commandment, he or she should go out of his way to try to make it feel as if it is the first time.

But why is this message relayed (through the use of the word “today”) specifically in the Shema prayer? It is precisely this prayer that is the most ubiquitous in all of Judaism, the most common to all Jews. Traditional Jews recite it each morning and each night in prayer, and then again before going to sleep. On Shabbat, when the Torah is taken from Ark and in the holiness of the Kedusha prayer in the Musaf service, the Shema is also recited. At the height of the Yom Kippur prayers, just as the Gates of Repentance are closing, the congregation recites the Shema once again. Even on one’s deathbed, the traditional Jew says the Shema with his last breath. Is there any more constant, repetitive prayer than the Shema? Are there any words more in the marrow of the Jew than these words? This prayer seems almost implanted in every Jew like something that cannot be removed. And it is these verses specifically that the Torah commands Jews to say as if they were new every day. Be like G-d. And the Shema, more than any other prayer, requires concentration in order to be fulfilled properly. It is interesting that it is in the morning blessing right before the Shema when Jews declare that each day for G-d is completely new.

### **THE EXTERNAL GENERATION**

The challenge of making everyday commandments, rituals and actions meaningful is a greater challenge today than in any previous generation. The rote performance of Judaism is satisfied with externals. And today’s generation, both in the Jewish and non-Jewish world, is all about externals. We live in an extremely shallow society, obsessed with labels, with wearing the correct clothes, where appearances mean everything. This emphasis affects non-Jews and Jews, even the most observant Jews. People have to be seen with the “right” people. Children have to go to the “right” school or Yeshiva, sometimes just for the label and brand of Judaism it represents.

We live in a time when there are few deeply held philosophical ideas. The most important value is that of pursuit of materialism and self-indulgence – i.e., the pursuit of pleasure. For the traditional Jew, his or her performance can be external, devoid of deep roots, the essence of the commandment itself. This is the challenge for Jews who do perform the rituals and do try to fulfill the strict minutiae of Jewish law. Even for them, it can be only a superficial fulfillment. What exactly is lacking? Some call it “passion”, others call it *kavannah*, that proper feeling, and some call it a lack of heart. But that is precisely what G-d desires most from Jews on Yom Kippur as well as all year long. The Talmud tells us<sup>30</sup> that the one thing G-d wants from each Jew is his “heart.” G-d truly wants the hearts of all Jews. The Almighty wants the performance of commandments, and customs, but only if they are done with heart, with feeling. This explains the story that follows in the Talmud.

### **TODAY’S GENERATION IS MISSING THE “HEART”**

In the days of Rabbi Judah, who lived in the earlier period known as the era of Amoraim, Jews living in the Land of Israel or the Middle East often faced a lack of rain. They had to pray for it and observe fast days, as was mandated by Jewish custom. In that generation, says the Talmud<sup>31</sup>, there were not such great Torah scholars. They only understood well one of the six sections of the Talmud. But those in later generations, the passage continues, knew every single tractate of Talmud, even the

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<sup>29</sup> Deuteronomy 13:5, Sotah 14a

<sup>30</sup> Sanhedrin 106b

<sup>31</sup> Sanhedrin 106b

obscure tractate Uktzin that is in the section of Taharot (which is not usually studied). Therefore, it would stand to reason that the scholars of the later generation were on a higher spiritual level, because they knew so much more. But the Talmud states that Rabbi Judah did not even have to fast in order to bring the rain. All he had to do was to take off his shoes (preparing to begin to pray) and the rains came. Even though the later Torah scholars fasted, prayed and cried out to G-d, the rains never came. They asked why this was so. The answer given is that G-d wants our "hearts." G-d wants sincerity and passion, not merely Torah scholarship. Rabbi Judah had it, but the later rabbis did not.

Like that Talmudic passage, previous generations of Jews had less Torah learning and Torah knowledge than many Jews today. But the previous generations of today's parents and grandparents had the "heart" that G-d desires, much more than this generation does. There are more Yeshivot today, more Torah learning taking place than ever before in any era of Jewish history. Today anyone can access Jewish learning in many formats – the traditional book form, MP3, videotape, Internet and other formats. There is even an App for that. It is similar with the observance of the dietary Kosher laws today. Many more Jews observe every aspect of these laws in a much more diligent manner than previous generations. There are over a thousand registered symbols for Kosher food. In previous generations, if there was one kosher symbol, it was a lot. The typical Bar Mitzvah boy gets Tefillin today that are much more Kosher than those of the greatest rabbis in pre-WW II Europe. But they were holier. They were closer to G-d. Why? The answer is that they had heart. This is what must the focus on Yom Kippur, to break the pattern. It is the present generation to whom Isaiah was referring in the source quoted above about rote performance of commandments: "This people comes before G-d and honors G-d with their lips and mouths but their hearts are far from G-d."

Therefore, all the learning, all the observance is less meaningful to G-d than the passion, the heart, the feeling of making each commandment performed as if it was the very first time. As the traditional Jew spends time with himself or herself on Yom Kippur, it is these thoughts that should occupy one's mind, with a resolve to make each day in the future, a true new and fresh experience, every day of the year.

### **NEILAH – THE FINAL PRAYER AS THE GATES CLOSE**

After twenty-four hours of prayers and fasting, how do the Jews in synagogue gather strength and fervor for that final prayer service of the day, that last hour of the unique additional service called *Neilah* – the Closing of the Gates of Repentance? It seems that by this time all thoughts have been already thought, all prayers already recited. And yet, this is the emotional crescendo that stirs all Jews in synagogue each year. What is so special about this prayer and what ideas are unique to this particular service?

In any special activity of importance that all people take part in, if it is indeed special, people tend to cherish the last moments, when they realize the activity will soon be finished. For those who cherish Yom Kippur, not as a day to "get it over with," but, rather, as a day to become one with oneself, and, hopefully, one with G-d, then the last moments naturally are very special and meaningful. In addition, for those Jews who truly believe that the words and ideas of the Talmud and *Unitane Tokef* prayer are real – that on Yom Kippur each person is literally praying for his or her life during the coming year – this last prayer takes on a significance of life and death. Even though Jews say the words three times daily, the words of the second blessing of the Shmoneh Esreh<sup>32</sup> take on new meaning at this moment: "G-d, You are faithful to restore life to the dead." During these moments, it is G-d who can change the verdict about each person in synagogue – those who may already have been pronounced dead, to a decree of life for the year, thus restoring "life" to those who are already [as if] "dead." These words are recited only a few lines after Jews recite the unique words for the Neilah prayer: "Remember us for life, the King who desires life, and seal us in the book of Life, for Your sake, the Living G-d."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Shmoneh Esreh prayer, end of second blessing

<sup>33</sup> Special insert in the first blessing of the Shmoneh Esreh of Neilah prayer

But, in addition to the timing, exactly how is the Neilah prayer different from all other prayers? Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik (1903-1993) answers that for forty days since the beginning of the month of Elul, G-d says to each Jew that it is up to him or her to repent. But some Jews cannot or will not make that first move, take that first step. Thus, in the Rosh Hashana service Jews say, "G-d opens his hand to he who knocks on the Gate of Repentance."<sup>34</sup> Each person has to knock on the door. G-d waits for that first knock. Or, Jews say in the *Unitane Tokef* prayer that G-d waits for each person until the day he dies. If he or she repents, G-d immediately accepts him.<sup>35</sup>

But in this prayer, Neilah, in contradistinction to all other prayers, G-d is like a very nervous parent waiting for the child to do something. And then He cannot wait any longer. Suddenly, after forty days of waiting, He takes an active role. It is only in Neilah that we say "G-d extends His hand to the sinners. His right hand is reaching out to accept those who repent."<sup>36</sup> G-d initiates. G-d reaches out. For the first time, all that Jews have to do at this moment is to grab on to that extended Hand of G-d. With the imagery of a train pulling out of the station, G-d extends the Hand to each Jew so that he or she can be lifted up onto the spiritual train of repentance. The knowledge that G-d stretches out His hand, G-d takes the first step only at this moment, should give every person in the synagogue, no matter how tired and hungry, the extra push to make that final prayer even more meaningful.

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<sup>34</sup> *Vechol Maaminim* prayer of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur

<sup>35</sup> *Unitane Tokef* prayer of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur

<sup>36</sup> Neilah prayer, Shmoneh Esreh