

A Dramatic Day in Dramatic Times: Making Yom Kippur

I. In the Torah – Do-Over After Tragedy, Day of Freedom

1. Vayikra 16:1-3,29-31

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| <p>The LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron who died when they drew too close to the presence of the LORD. The LORD said to Moses: Tell your brother Aaron that he is not to come at will into the Shrine behind the curtain, in front of the cover that is upon the ark, lest he die; for I appear in the cloud over the cover. Thus only shall Aaron enter the Shrine: with a bull of the herd for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering.</p> | <p>וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אַחֲרֵי מוֹת שְׁנֵי בְנֵי אַהֲרֹן בְּקִרְבָּתָם לִפְנֵי־ה' וַיִּמְתּוּ: וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה דַּבֵּר אֶל־אַהֲרֹן אַחִיד וְאַל־יָבֹא בְּכָל־עֵת אֶל־הַקֹּדֶשׁ מִבֵּית לְפָרֹכֶת אֶל־פְּנֵי הַכַּפֹּרֶת אֲשֶׁר עַל־הָאָרוֹן וְלֹא יָמוּת כִּי בָעֵנָן אֶרְאֶה עַל־הַכַּפֹּרֶת: בְּזֹאת יָבֹא אַהֲרֹן אֶל־הַקֹּדֶשׁ בְּכַר בֶּן־בָּקָר לְחַטָּאת וְאֵיל לְעֹלָה:</p> |
| <p>And this shall be to you a law for all time: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall practice self-denial; and you shall do no manner of work, neither the citizen nor the alien who resides among you. For on this day atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you of all your sins; you shall be clean before the LORD. It shall be a sabbath of complete rest for you, and you shall practice self-denial; it is a law for all time.</p> | <p>וְהָיְתָה לָכֶם לְחֻקַּת עוֹלָם בְּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּעָשׂוֹר לַחֹדֶשׁ תַּעֲנֹו אֶת־נַפְשׁוֹתֵיכֶם וְכָל־מְלָאכָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ הָאֲזֻרָח וְהַגֵּר הַגֵּר בְּתוֹכְכֶם: כִּי־בַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יִכַּפֵּר עֲלֵיכֶם לְטָהָר אֶתְכֶם מִכָּל חַטֹּאתֵיכֶם לִפְנֵי ה' תִּטְהָרוּ: שַׁבַּת שְׁבִתוֹן הִיא לָכֶם וְעַנִּיתֶם אֶת־נַפְשׁוֹתֵיכֶם חֻקַּת עוֹלָם:</p> |

2. Vayikra 25:8-10

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| <p>You shall count off seven weeks of years—seven times seven years—so that the period of seven weeks of years gives you a total of forty-nine years. Then you shall sound the horn loud; in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month—the Day of Atonement—you shall have the horn sounded throughout your land and you shall hallow the fiftieth year. You shall proclaim release throughout the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: each of you shall return to his holding and each of you shall return to his family.</p> | <p>וּסְפַרְתָּ לָהּ שִׁבְעַת שָׁנִים שִׁבְעַת שָׁנִים שִׁבְעַת פְּעָמִים וְהָיָה לָהּ יָמֵי שִׁבְעַת שָׁבָתוֹת הַשָּׁנִים תִּשְׁעָה וְאַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה: וְהִעֲבַרְתָּ שׁוֹפָר תְּרוּעָה בְּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּעָשׂוֹר לַחֹדֶשׁ בַּיּוֹם הַכַּפֹּרִים תַּעֲבִירוּ שׁוֹפָר בְּכָל־אַרְצְכֶם: וְקִדַּשְׁתֶּם אֶת־שָׁנַת הַחֲמִשִּׁים שָׁנָה וּקְרַאתֶם דְּרוֹר בְּאַרְץ לְכָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל יוֹבֵל הוּא תְהִיָּה לָכֶם וְשַׁבְתֶּם אִישׁ אֶל־אַחֲזָתוֹ וְאִישׁ אֶל־מִשְׁפַּחְתּוֹ תָּשֻׁבוּ:</p> |
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3. Sefer ha-Ittur (12th Century, Isaac ben Aba Mari of Marseilles), part 2, end of Hilkhot Yom HaKipurim

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| <p>Our custom is that after the Arvit prayer, we blow once on the shofar without a blessing. I have heard it is because on Yom Kippur, the Satan does not have permission to criticize, so when he returns at the end of Yom Kippur we berate him. Rabbenu Hai wrote in a responsum: "I did not find reason in this. But it is more likely that it is reminiscent of the Jubilee: "On Yom Kippur you shall have the horn sounded throughout your land". And since we do not know the calculation of the dates of the Jubilee year, they instituted this every year to remember the Jubilee.</p> | <p>מנהגינו לתקוע אחר תפילת ערבית סימן אחד בשופר בלא ברכה. ושמעתי משום שהשטן ביום כיפור לית ליה רשותא לאסתוני, ובמוצאי יום הכיפורים בחזרתו מגערים בו. ואמר רבינו האי בתשובה ולא מצאתי טעם. אלא דומה שהוא זכר ליובל – "ביום הכיפורים תעבירו שופר בכל ארצכם." ולפי שאינו ברור חשבון זמן היובל התקינו בכל שנה ושנה זכר ליובל.</p> |
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II. In the Midrash – Matan Torah and Courtship Day

4. Midrash Aggadah, Shmot 34:1

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| <p><i>Sculpt for yourself</i> – this was on the first of Elul. Since on the 17th of Tammuz the tablets were broken, and Moses prostrated himself in prayer for forty days to get forgiveness for the sin of the Calf, and then he spent forty days receiving the second tablets. So we find that the second tablets were given on Yom Kippur. And so God established it as a day of forgiveness every year. Therefore the custom is to blow the shofar starting from the first of Elul, because of the beginning of the second tablets, because Moshe declared when he went up to Mount Sinai that the Israelites should not return to their bad habits as before.</p> | <p>פסל לך. זה היה בראש חדש אלול כי בשבעה עשר בתמוז נשתברו הלוחות, וארבעים יום התנפל משה רבינו ע"ה בתפלה על מחילת מעשה העגל, וארבעים יום עשה בקבלת לוחות האחרונות, מצינו שביום הכפורים ניתנו לוחות האחרונות וקבעו הקב"ה יום מחילה וסליחה בכל שנה ושנה, לפיכך נהגו לתקוע שופר בראש חדש אלול, על שם התחלת לוחות האחרונות, שהכריז משה רבנו כאשר עלה על הר סיני, שלא יחזרו ישראל לסיאורן כבתחלה:</p> |
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5. Midrash Lekach Tov (early 12th Century, Tobias ben Eliezer), Bamidbar, Parshat Pinchas

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| <p><i>One he-goat</i>: Why is a he-goat mentioned on both Shavuot and Yom Kippur? It draws a parallel between Shavuot and Yom Kippur. Just as Yom Kippur is the day of the Giving of the Torah, so too Shavuot is the day of the Giving of the Torah. Since the first (should say: second) tablets were given on Yom Kippur, and the Ten Commandments were said on Shavuot.</p> | <p>שעיר עזים אחד. ולמה נאמר בעצרת ויום הכפורים שעיר? מקיש עצרת ליום הכפורים. מה יום הכפורים יום מתן תורה, אף עצרת יום מתן תורה. מפני שלוחות הראשונים ניתנו ביום הכפורים ועשרת הדברות נאמרו בעצרת.</p> |
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6. Babylonian Talmud Taanit, last Mishna, and the Gemara on it on page 30b

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| <p>Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said: There were no days as joyous for the Jewish people as the fifteenth of Av and as Yom Kippur, as on them the daughters of Jerusalem would go out in borrowed white clothes, so as not to embarrass one who did not have. All the garments require immersion. And the daughters of Jerusalem would go out and dance in the vineyards. And what would they say? Young man, please lift up your eyes and see what you choose for yourself. Do not set your eyes toward beauty, but set your eyes toward a good family.</p> | <p>משנה - אָמַר רַבִּן שִׁמּוֹן בֶּן גַּמְלִיאֵל: לֹא הָיוּ יָמִים טוֹבִים לְיִשְׂרָאֵל כַּחַמְשָׁה עָשָׂר בְּאָב וְכִיוֹם הַכַּפּוּרִים, שֶׁבָּהֶן בָּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם יוֹצְאוֹת בְּכָלֵי לְבוֹן שְׂאוּלִין — שֶׁלֹּא לְבַיֵּשׁ אֶת מִי שְׂאִין לוֹ. כָּל הַפְּלִים טְעוּנִין טְבִילָה. וּבָנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם יוֹצְאוֹת וְחוֹלוֹת בְּכַרְמִים. וּמָה הָיוּ אוֹמְרוֹת: בְּחוֹר, שָׂא נָא עֵינֶיךָ וּרְאֵה מָה אֵתָּה בּוֹרֵר לָךְ. אַל תִּתֵּן עֵינֶיךָ בְּנוֹי, תֵּן עֵינֶיךָ בְּמִשְׁפָּחָה.</p> |
| <p>Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said: There were no days as happy for the Jewish people as the fifteenth of Av and as Yom Kippur. Granted, Yom Kippur, because it has the elements of pardon and forgiveness, and it is the day on which the last tablets were given. However, what is the fifteenth of Av?</p> | <p>גמרא שם ל: - אָמַר רַבִּן שִׁמּוֹן בֶּן גַּמְלִיאֵל: לֹא הָיוּ יָמִים טוֹבִים לְיִשְׂרָאֵל כַּחַמְשָׁה עָשָׂר בְּאָב וְכִיוֹם הַכַּפּוּרִים. בְּשֶׁלֶמָּה יוֹם הַכַּפּוּרִים — מִשּׁוּם דָּאִית בֵּיהּ סְלִיחָה וּמְחִילָה, יוֹם שְׁנִיתָנוּ בוֹ לוחות האחרונות. אֵלֶּא חַמְשָׁה עָשָׂר בְּאָב מַאי הִיא?</p> |

III. Germany, 1913

7. Emil Fackenheim, To Mend the World: Foundations of Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought

In an all-night discussion (July 7, 1913) with two friends, both Christians of Jewish origin, Rosenzweig found in them a faith so genuine, and in himself a hunger so profound, that he, too, must convert to Christianity. And during a single day (October 11, 1913, attending Yom Kippur services in a small Orthodox synagogue in Berlin, since he could come to Christianity only as a Jew), he made the astounding discovery that “Religion: Jewish”, was not, after all, an empty notation at a registry office, but nothing less than the unique relation between the Jewish people and the God of the world.

The published materials do not say what happened to Franz Rosenzweig on that fateful Yom Kippur. Even the unpublished materials may never disclose it. It would be characteristic of this man to have written much about himself but nothing about his “Road to Damascus.” But perhaps to know what happened we need only study the *Mahzor* – the Yom Kippur prayer book. Perhaps he spent this day standing before the Divine Other in all His awesome otherness – the God above both world and man that is yet present to Israel among men in the world, sternly demanding repentance and gently bestowing forgiveness.

IV. Jerusalem, 1943-1944

8. Menachem Begin, *The Revolt: Story of the Irgun*, trans. Samuel Katz, 1951.

The dispute over the Wailing Wall and the Old City is probably a reflection of the whole struggle for the ownership of Eretz Yisrael...

The voice of history is not mystic. It is a mighty factor in reality. It was this voice that the British government tried to silence. They decreed that Jews were forbidden to blow the shofar at the Wall. And when Jews ignored the ban – as the young disciples of Jabotinsky did for thirteen consecutive years – there followed an ugly spectacle, humiliating and infuriating. I saw this spectacle for myself on the Day of Atonement in 1943 when with a group of friends I prayed at the Wall.

The sun was setting. The congregation of sorrowing Jews lifted their voices on high; it was the sacred Nei-lah (closing). Prayer at the holy place, and the time was that of the great catastrophe in Europe... And then, from both sides of the courtyard, streamed British police armed with rifles and batons. They stood among the worshippers, threatening them with their very presence. They had come “in the King’s name” to prevent “an illegal act”: the blowing of the shofar at the close of the Sabbath of Sabbaths. As the end of the prayer approached they squeezed further into the mass of worshippers, some even elbowing their way up to the wall. And when in spite of them the shofar was heard, their fury was unrestrained. They set upon the worshippers while the prayer was still in progress. They hit out at heads; batons whistled through the air. Here and there was heard the cry of someone injured. A song too burst forth, Hatikvah. Then the police struck out in all directions and chaos reigned. Finally they withdrew.

That night as, more heart-sore than injured, we stood by the Wailing Wall, we said to each other: “This is real slavery.”

...On the following new year (10 days before the Day of Atonement) we recalled the shame and our decision. We determined to not to permit a repetition, or if it occurred, not to let it go unpunished. We made a complex plan, both psychological and practical.

...Our warning proved effective. The oppressor retreated. On the Day of Atonement in 1944 – for the first time in 14 years – the British police did not come near the Wall. They stood at a distance, and for greater security took off their number tags. The prayer was not interrupted. The great blast of the Shofar was truly great. The sounder was no longer “illegal.” He did not hide nor disguise himself. He stood up openly and let himself be heard through the Shofar – the trumpet of revolt.