

The joy of Yom Kippur comes from wiping the slate clean

by Rabbi Judah Dardik

Vayikra/Leviticus 16:1-34

Maftir Bamidbar/Numbers 29:7-11

Isaiah 57:14 — 58:14

Vayikra/Leviticus 18:1-30

The Book of Yonah

Clearly Yom Kippur is a serious day. It is hard for any hungry (and possibly a bit bored) person leafing through the prayer book to miss that part.

But many miss the notion that it is traditionally seen as an incredibly joyous day as well. This is so very much the case that the Talmud (Ta'anit 30B) actually lists it as one of the two happiest days of the year.

According to that passage, it is because we are forgiven on Yom Kippur that lends the day its intense joy. Just think about it: no matter what happens (and we find ourselves in all sorts of unexpected and disappointing situations each year), we have a day set aside that is dedicated to making amends and wiping the slate clean. A fresh start — a gift of a day!

Still, why this date? Why not the first day of the year to start all over, some day near the end like an annual review, or perhaps the midpoint? The Talmud suggests that the character of this date stems from a historical event. If one does the math (Rashi's commentary on Exodus 33:11 is happy to do it for you) and considers Moshe going up the mountain to get the Torah at Shavuot time; 40 days later coming down and breaking the tablets; 40 days of praying for forgiveness; and then 40 days of going back up to get the second tablets as replacements, one lands squarely on Yom Kippur. This is the day we received the Ten Commandments again after dreadful mistakes, making it forever after a day of making amends and starting over again as new.

"When Moshe descended from Mount Sinai [on Yom Kippur], with the two tablets in his hands... he did not know that the skin of his face had become radiant" (Shemot 34:29). Moshe was beaming, and people perceived rays of light and glory emanating from him. (A mistranslation of the word for "ray" in this verse into "horn" is likely the reason Michelangelo depicted Moshe as having horns on his head.)

What happened that Yom Kippur that left him glowing? And perhaps more important, how can we as people get to the level of being radiant as Moshe did?

My beloved teacher, Rabbi J.J. Schacter, pointed out a fascinating midrash in the Yalkut Shimoni at the end of Ki Tisa. It tells us that Moshe had leftover ink in the inkwell he used to write the Torah, and that when he was done he poured that extra over his face — and that is what left him beaming. How very odd! What is this bizarre imagery meant to teach us?

Try for a moment thinking of Moshe as an author. He likely affected more than any other writer in history. His writing has changed and affected billions of lives. He is forever known as "Moshe — our teacher." And yet, when he was done writing, he still had some more ink left in his inkwell. There was more Moshe could still do, could still affect, could still work to change and make better on this earth. He wasn't finished, and he "poured the ink" over himself — basking in the potential of what was yet to come.

It is all too easy to give up on ourselves, and think that we are finished. That we've done what we can. That we're too old, too set, too far gone, too far away.

But Yom Kippur is the day that Moshe teaches us differently. It teaches that no matter who we are, we all still have "ink in our inkwells." We can grow; we can do more.

The joyful message of Yom Kippur is that it is never too late to reach deep within ourselves and find ways to grow.

It is never too late to pursue greatness, to change life in small ways, to use our time on this earth constructively.

Try a new mitzvah during the year. Try a new project. Take a class. As long as we are here, there is ink in our inkwells, and time to grasp rays of light and inspiration.

Rabbi Judah Dardik is the spiritual leader at Oakland's Beth Jacob. He can be reached at rabbi@bethjacoboakland.org