

Mekor Chaim

Yom Kippur – Dancing Cheek to Cheek

By Rabbi Baruch Frydman-Kohl

If Rosh Hashanah is about awareness of God, a proclamation of divine sovereignty and transcendence, then Yom Kippur is about getting close to God. The ritual is a “dance” to help establish the connection, reveal our personality and demonstrate by our behavior that we want such a relationship to exist.

Our tradition teaches that the final set of the Covenantal Tablets, the *luhot haberit*, were brought to the people on Yom Kippur. The ritual of Yom Kippur as described in the Torah can be seen as an elaborate ceremony designed to recreate that experience of Sinai, when the divine Presence was felt among the people.

Prior to ascending the mountain, Moshe removed his shoes and purified himself to be prepared to come closer to the Presence. The people also engaged in elaborate purification rituals. To re-enact such an experience through ritual required the purification of the sanctuary and those who serve in it. The word for such ritual purification is *toharah* and we will find it repeated many times in the Yom Kippur liturgy.

Just as the core of the Sinai event was limited to Moshe, the ritual reenactment limits entry to the inner sanctuary, the *kadosh kodoshim*, to the *kohen gadol*, the chief priest, and permits such entry only on Yom Kippur.

The Torah tells us that when the Sinai event took place, there was thunder and lightening and the mountain was full of fire. The people were frightened. Closeness to God and closeness to another person creates vulnerability. The Presence of God is desired, yet awesome. All the prophets that speak about such an encounter are afraid. In his award winning book, *The God of Old*, James Kugel of Harvard discusses ritual as a way of taming the encounter with a being that transcends our human experiences and control.

In its ritual reenactment for Yom Kippur, the purification was intended to protect that holy space and those priestly attendants when the Presence of God would be perceived in the *mikdash*, the sacred sanctuary. The word for such protection is *kapparah*, a term that will also recur many times in our liturgy. Originally, *kapparah* meant to place a protective covering over something. Later it came to be understood as the covering of sin to enable a person to go

forward in the process of teshuvah/ repentance and turning to God.

While this Biblical ritual seems arcane, ancient and alien to us, it helps if we try to understand it as a type of courtship with rules about how the two lovers might get close. There is a “dance” that we go through as we see or hear about someone, Google the person, check them on J-match or j-date, or talk to a friend to find out a bit more about him or her. Eventually we call or e-mail, set up a coffee date – a limited encounter to protect ourselves. Slowly we reveal something of our personal life and gradually deepen the relationship. If we are fortunate we will, in the words of Irving Berlin, dance “cheek to cheek.”

Perhaps Yom Kippur might be seen as a variation on the play, “I Love You. You’re Perfect. Now Change.” The haftarah from Isaiah will try to tell us how to change in our relationship as we try to move to greater and greater intimacy. As we read the Torah, think about the people who are important to you and reflect on your relationship with God, for all of Yom Kippur is about trying to get close.

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