



CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

Yom Kippur 5771 By Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer

Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest in the Temple in Jerusalem would enter into the Holy of Holies to purify the sanctuary and make expiation for the people of Israel. Upon the completion of these sacred rites, he was granted the opportunity to murmur a few words of prayer. The rabbis emphasize in law and lore that his prayer had to be kept short, lest the people fear in his absence that some part of his service had been completed in error and that he had been struck down behind the partition, away from their view.

At precisely the 'hour of compassion, the moment of favor,' the priest was granted permission to speak on behalf of the people Israel. What an opportunity! The pressure was surely enormous, and the opportunity immense. The rabbis offer some thoughts as to the content of this brief prayer. In one version of the prayer described in the Jerusalem Talmud, which is also part of the Yom Kippur liturgy recited by many Ashkenazi Jews, the high priest ends his petition for the collective with an odd request: "As to the people of the Sharon region: May it be your will, O Lord, our God and the God of our ancestors, that their houses not become their graves."

Now we must imagine that the people of the Sharon plain lived with a constant fear we will hopefully never experience: depending on one's interpretation, a fear that their sand houses would collapse, a fear of flash flooding in a flood plain, or possibly both. Nonetheless, it is surprising to find this very specific prayer in the midst of a broader moment dedicated to the collective. Why not pray for all those who suffer, for all potential victims of what we coarsely call "acts of God"? What makes the residents of the Sharon so unique that they merit several disproportionate moments of the high priest's precious communion with the Divine presence?

Our ability to relate to, to speak to, and ultimately to effect global change is intimately tied to our local lives. The route to a universal vision runs through our particular experience of the world. A famous fable speaks to the folly of trying to set out to change the world: Until we start with ourselves and radiate outwards to our communities, we are forestalled by the magnitude of the task. Perhaps the same metaphor for how we bridge local to global responsibility applies to the prayers we make for the world around us. If we cannot identify with the particular, will we be able to pray for the universal?

There is no hierarchy of suffering and loss, and the soul-numbing events of the past few years—tsunamis, hurricanes, earthquakes—push us to become either immune to the maelstrom of need or overwhelmed by it. On one hand, the shrinking global world makes us ever more sensitive and acutely aware of the devastation being wrought upon the most fragile societies and populations on earth; on the other, the frequency with which these natural disasters appear on the news—and the overwhelming and insatiable needs they create—incline us to shrink back and focus only on the needs that are right before us, the ones we think we can actually meet. We are at risk that our fear of global responsibility will make us address only local needs.

This is the human need that the prayer of the high priest comes to address: to remind us that it is through relating and responding to a specific crisis, to a local catastrophe, that we become aware and empowered to be agents of awareness and change everywhere. Change is always incremental, and the incentive to become an agent of change is always going to be personal. Our only real hope is to sift through the magnitude of devastation in search of small and doable tasks, and our best chance at success will be to use our local experience of the world as a lens with which to understand the larger picture. Compassion for what is nearby enables us see each of these more distant moments of devastation as somehow closer to home.

The high priest references the people of Sharon not to close off the possibility that devastation exists elsewhere, nor to place their suffering on a pedestal, but rather to give us an opening to understand what fear and loss feel like everywhere—to open a keyhole to an unredeemed world that, if laid plain before us, would be overwhelming and blinding. The high priest gives us language of clarity and purpose, **a local language of global responsibility**, reminding us that our experience of the particular is the lens we need to understand the universal. He utters these words so that in his private, penitential moment he can see with the greatest clarity the magnitude of the work that awaits the Omnipotent, and so that he can relate personally to the heaviness of the task that awaits both God and us.



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