



Tishrei, the Mitzvah of Teshuva, and Universalism

By: Shabtai Atlow

I

The Rambam¹ writes (Hil. Teshuva 1:1-2):

1. All the mitzvot of the Torah, whether positive precepts or negative precepts, if an **Adam** transgresses one of them, whether intentionally or unintentionally, when that person repents and returns from his sin, he is obligated to confess before G-d, etc....
2. Since the scapegoat (se'ir hamishtalei'ach) is a kappara for all of **Israel**², the High Priest confesses upon it (i.e., recites a confession) in terms of "All of Israel", and confesses upon it all the sins of all of Israel...

These two laws in the Rambam use very different terminology. In the first law, the Rambam speaks of Adam—humanity: "... if a *person* (Adam) transgresses one of them...," that person must confess before G-d.

On the other hand, the second law teaches an institutional confession by a representative of the people of Israel, on behalf of the people. The purpose of this confession is to effect *kappara* for the people of Israel, via the ritual of the scapegoat.

The Rambam is defining two different processes for repentance. One is a universal process, in which an Adam, a human, confesses his sin before G-d. On the other hand, there is a particularistic process, linked with the rituals of the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), by which the people of Israel attain *kappara*. This understanding of the Rambam's use of Adam, as distinguished from the

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1. Rambam-Rabbi Moses ben (son of) Maimon, or Maimonides (1135–1204)—was born in Cordoba, Spain and eventually settled in Fustat (old Cairo), Egypt. Maimonides is one of the best known figures in Jewish history. While practicing medicine in the court of the Caliph, he achieved renown as a major authority in Jewish law and in philosophy as well. His major works include the Mishneh Torah, the first systematic code of Jewish law, and The Guide of the Perplexed, a philosophical work directed at Jews who sought guidance in combining their secular education with their traditional Jewish belief system.
 2. Note that throughout this article, terms such as "Israel", "the people of Israel", etc. are used to refer to Jews. This follows the Rambam's way of referring to Jews. The modern political entity of the State of Israel is not referred to.

Rambam's use of Israel is highlighted in the third chapter of the laws of repentance. In Chapter 3, the Rambam wants to define a *righteous person* (*tzadik*): "Each and every person (Adam) has merits and sins. One who has more merits than sins is righteous, and one whose sins exceed his merits is evil. If his sins and his merits are equal, he is "in-between" (*benoni*). And the same principle applies to a country: if the merits of all its inhabitants exceed their sins, the country is righteous, and if the sins of the inhabitants exceed their merits, that country is evil. This same principle applies to the whole world." By referring to "Each and every person," and "a [generic] country," and "the whole world," the Rambam makes it clear that he is referring to humans, Adam, and not Israelites.

In fact, if one looks at the many instances in the Laws of Repentance where Rambam refers to Adam (90 occurrences), as opposed to Israel (40 occurrences), discounting those cases where Rambam himself is quoting (and thus the text he is quoting cannot be held to Rambam's usage of language), one sees that the Rambam generally uses the term Adam in a generic fashion-namely, humanity.

All of this proves, at least according to Rambam, that, just as Jews have 613 commandments to observe-and if a Jew transgresses, he must repent-so too, non-Jews, who have seven biblical precepts to observe³, must also repent if they transgress.

In other words, the existence of a commandment, any commandment, implicitly carries with it a second commandment to repent if the commandment is violated-regardless of whether the commanded person is "Adam" or "Israel". If a person transgresses, that person must repent his transgression. The astute reader will no doubt point out that, in the second of the laws of repentance cited at the start of this article, I noted that an Israelite must not only repent but must also achieve *kappara*. But the need for *kappara* is related to the Israelite dimension of a person's being. Nevertheless, Israelites also have a primary dimension to their being, namely, that they are Adam, humans. In other words, the first law cited above applies to all persons, including Israelites.

3. 1. Not to kill; 2. Not to steal; 3. Laws of incest and adultery; 4. Not to blaspheme; 5. Not to commit idolatry; 6. To establish a legal system; and 7. Not to eat the flesh of a live animal (Rambam, Laws of Kings, 9:1).

This is stressed by the practice of the people of Israel on that great and awesome day, the day that, by its very nature, is dedicated to *kappara*—namely, Yom Kippur. As the day draws to its climax, the people of Israel stop and read the Book of the Prophet Jonah. The story of Jonah is well known—the prophet flees his mission, is swallowed by a huge fish, is later expelled from the fish's belly, and goes on to call on the people of Nineveh⁴ to repent. The crucial point of the whole story is that the prophet is sent, not to deliver his message to Dan or Beersheba. Jonah is sent to Nineveh, a city of non-Jews.

At the end of the book, Jonah has a fascinating argument with G-d. After delivering his message, Jonah departs Nineveh, and sits outside the city to see what will become of it. A vine grows over Jonah providing him with shade. G-d makes the vine wither and die. As Jonah is about to pass out from the heat, he proclaims (4:8), “Better that I should die than live!”

G-d says to Jonah, “Why should you be angry about the vine?”

Jonah responds (4:9), “I am angry enough to die.”

Then G-d responds, “You took pity on this vine, which you did not tend or grow. It sprang up overnight and withered. Shall I not take pity on Nineveh, the great city, which has more than 120,000 people who do not know their right from their left, and many cattle.” G-d cares about *all* the inhabitants of the world—their moral well-being is of His concern.

That is the lesson we read as we approach the climax of Yom Kippur.

II

Yom Kippur, with its dual focus on the people of Israel and the people of the world falls on the 10th day of the month of Tishrei. In fact, Yom Kippur occurs between two other Holidays—Rosh Hashanah at the start of the month, and Sukkoth, on the 15th of the month.

4. Modern day Mosul. During the summer of 2003, there were reports in the media about an American Army Rabbi who visited what is, by tradition, the tomb of the prophet Jonah (see, for instance, http://www.afsi.org/oregon/RecentComments/Rabbi_in_Iraq.htm).

Tishrei, it seems, is a month dedicated to the people of the world. The first day (in fact, the first two days of Tishrei) marks the holiday of Rosh Hashana. Rosh Hashana is traditionally the anniversary of the day when Adam—the first human—was created. This is marked in two ways on Rosh Hashana:

First, after the shofar is blown, we pray, “hayom harat olam...” “Today is the birthday of the world. Today all mankind is judged....”⁵

Second, the Mishna in tractate Rosh Hashana describes the various judgment days during the course of the year: Pesach for produce; Shavuot for fruit; on Rosh Hashana, “All those who have come into the world pass before Him as *bnei maron*”; and Sukkot for water.

The Talmud explains the term *bnei maron* to mean that all of the occupants of the world pass in judgment before the Creator either as sheep passing one-by-one before their shepherd, or as soldiers passing one-by-one before their king. Regardless of whether one explains the mishna in the pastoral fashion or the military fashion, “all those who have come into the world pass before Him.” This idea is reflected in the Ashkenazi rite during the recitation, before the Kedusha of Musaf, of the solemn poem *Unetaneh Tokef* (by R. Amnon of Mainz,⁶ c. 1020, cf. *Sefer Or Zaru’a*, vol. 2, Hil. RH, 276⁷).

The Sages highlight the universalistic nature of Sukkot by pointing out that during the days of Sukkot, 70 cows are sacrificed.⁸ The Sages tell us that the Torah commands the Jewish people to sacrifice 70 cows on behalf of the 70 nations of the world. All year long, sacrifices are brought by the Jewish community on its own behalf. On Sukkot, the Torah tells the Jewish nation that in addition to its own sacrifices, it must bring sacrifices on behalf of all the nations of the world.

5. Translation from the High Holiday Prayer Book, translation and annotation by P. Birnbaum, Hebrew Publishing Company, 1951.

6. Mayence, Magentza

7. During the Camp David Negotiations, President Carter urged Menachem Begin to agree just to consider including Jerusalem in the Camp David Accords. Begin refused, and Carter urged him to agree to just think about it. Begin, who was from Brisk, told Carter the story of R. Amnon. In the end, the known positions about Jerusalem were mentioned in the letters accompanying the accords, but no more than that (I am grateful to Yisrael Medad of the Menachem Begin Heritage Center for verifying this story).

8. Numbers 29:12-34



Tishrei

In short, we see that the holidays of Tishrei all have a universal side to them.⁹ On the other hand, the holidays of Nisan,¹⁰ Pesach and Shavuot, are particularistic, focused on Jews.

Our discussion of the festivals of Tishrei versus the festivals of Nisan is related to a dispute between the Sages R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua, found on pages 10b–11a of tractate Rosh Hashana. R. Eliezer teaches that the world was created in Tishrei. R. Yehoshua teaches that the world was created in Nisan. On page 27a of tractate Rosh Hashana, the Talmud says that on Rosh Hashana itself, we add to our prayers the phrase, “this day is the beginning of Your deeds, a reminder of the first day....” Indeed, the Talmud wants to know: according to which sage do we add this phrase? It would seem clear that we add this phrase according to R. Eliezer, who teaches that creation occurred in Tishrei. But since the Talmud also teaches that the prayer on Yom Kippur of the Jubilee year is identical to the prayer of Rosh Hashana, the Talmud is not satisfied that we add this phrase according to R. Eliezer, since Yom Kippur is not, “the beginning of Your deeds, a reminder of the first day.” The Tosafot there (s.v. *Kemaan Matzlinan*) answer this question by changing our understanding of the phrase in question.

The Tosafot, citing Rabbenu Tam, assert that “the beginning of Your deeds, a reminder of the first day...” is not referring to the creation of the world. The phrase means, rather, “This is the beginning of your deeds *of judgment on which the world is judged if it is worthy of continued existence, or not.*” The Tosafot continues and explains that the idea of Rosh Hashana as the beginning of the *judgment* of the world applies also to Yom Kippur (the concluding day of the judgment).

The Tosafot next resolve a contradiction in the liturgical poems of R. Eliezer haKalir concerning this dispute and explain that, in fact, the world was created

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9. This is not to ignore the particularistic, Jewish side to the holidays of Tishrei: Rosh Hashana and its relationship to akeidat Yitzhak (the binding of Isaac), Yom Kippur and its relationship to forgiveness for the sin of the golden calf, and Sukkot, “for in Sukkot I took the children of Israel out of Egypt,” to name just three. As is the case with all Jewish holidays, there are many meanings to the holiday. The point here is that all the holidays of Tishrei also have a universalistic side to them.
 10. Since Shavuot is entirely dependent on Pesach for its date, I include Shavuot as one of the holidays of Nisan. This is alluded to in the Mishnaic name of Shavuot-Atzeret, conclusion; Shavuot is the conclusion of Pesach. On the level of homiletics, this works very nicely: the point of the Exodus is to get to Sinai and receive the Torah. Similarly, a bird lays an egg (Exodus), so that the egg will hatch a bird (receiving the Torah).

in Nisan as R. Yehoshua holds. However, G-d *decided* to create the world the previous Tishrei, as R. Eliezer asserts. Thus, the plans for creation were laid during the month of universalism.

The phrase quoted by the Talmud in fact does appear in our prayers for Rosh Hashana in connection with the *Zichronot* verses of Musaf. In fact, the *Zichronot* prayers stress the universalistic aspect of Rosh Hashana:

Thou dost remember thy ancient work, and art mindful of all that was formed in days of old. All secrets and countless mysteries from the beginning of time are open to thee. There is no forgetting before thy throne of glory; there is not a thing hidden from thy eyes. Thou dost remember every deed, and *nobody is kept out of thy sight*. All things are well known to thee, L-rd our G-d, who dost look to *the end of all generations*.

From the beginning, from the very first, didst thou make a decree of a memorial day for the remembrance of the manifold deeds of untold *humanity*. This day, the anniversary of the first day of your creation, is indeed a statute for Israel, an ordinance of the G-d of Jacob. On it, sentence is pronounced *upon countries* for war and peace, for famine and abundance. On this day *mortals* are recorded for life and death. *Who is not* called to account on this day? Indeed the record of *every person* is set before thee; *man's* acts and movements, designs and impulses are noted....

Also *Noah* didst thou remember graciously, granting him merciful aid when thou didst send the flood to destroy all creatures because of their evil doings.¹¹

I have placed in italics all the universalistic terms in these paragraphs: nobody is kept out of your sight; the end of all generations; humanity; upon countries; mortals; who is not called to account; every person; man's acts; Noah.¹²

11. Translation from the High Holiday Prayer Book, translation and annotation by P. Birnbaum, Hebrew Publishing Company, 1951. Note that the phrase that I translated above as "the beginning of Your deeds, a reminder of the first day..." is here translated as: "This day, the anniversary of the first day of your creation."

12. Noah, as the father of humanity after the flood, is the ancestor of us all. As such, mentioning the remembrance of Noah in the prayers of Rosh Hashana is entirely universalistic.

III

Rav Yisrael Shurin שליט"א, in his 5765 Shabbat Shuva drasha,¹³ related a Midrash:

Many years after Cain killed Abel, Adam met Cain and asked him how his murder trial had gone. Cain told Adam that it turned out all right because he repented. Indeed, the Midrash Tanhuma¹⁴ relates this dialogue between Cain and G-d:

- Cain: My father and my mother are on Earth, and they do not know that I killed him (Abel), and You are in heaven, and you know?
- G-d: Fool! I bear the entire world....
- Cain: The entire world you bear, and my sin *you* cannot bear?! My sin is too great for *me* to bear!
- G-d: Since you have repented, go into exile from this place. As is said, "and Cain went out from before G-d, and dwelled in the land of Nod."

The Hebrew phrase "וישב בארץ נוד"—dwelled in the land of Nod," is used by the Midrash as a play on words. "וישב - and he dwelled" can also be understood as meaning "and he repented."

Another Midrash, from Pskita deRav Kahana, Bahodesh HaShevi'i quoted in Sefer HaToda'a and Agnon's Yamim Nora'im, says:

The first human was created on Rosh Hashanna. How? During the first hour of the day G-d decided to create him..., during the tenth hour he transgressed, during the eleventh hour he was judged, during the twelfth hour he was pardoned¹⁵ by the Holy one, praised be He! G-d said to him (Adam), you are a sign for your descendants. Just as you came before me in judgment on this day (Rosh Hashanna), and you went out pardoned, so too, in the future, your descendants will come before me on this day and will go out pardoned.

13. Beit Knesset Magen Avraham, Efrat.

14. Tanhuma, Breishit §9 (Warsaw ed.).

15. בדימוס in the Pskita

Unlike the first Midrash about Cain, this second Midrash does not explicitly state that Adam repented. Nevertheless, Adam was pardoned on Rosh Hashanna.

These Midrashim make it clear that the first penitent, the first baal teshuva, was either Cain or Adam. By pointing out that Cain or Adam—and not Avraham, Yitzhak, Yaakov, Yosef, Yehuda, Reuven, or any of the pantheon of the characters ordinarily looked to as exemplars of proper Jewish behavior—was the first penitent, the Midrash affirms for us that teshuva is universalistic in nature.

Shabtai Atlow came to NDS in 1997, in the I&T Line. He is now a patent attorney in the Patents Group. Shabtai lives in Efrat with his wife and five sons.

Tishrei

