

Yom Kippur 5776

The most crucial element of the Yom Kippur service in Temple times was the Avodah- the service of the High priest in the Holy of Holies. His role was to gain atonement for the sins of all Israel. Seven days previously, he would leave his home, and go to one of the Temple courtyards where he would begin preparations for the unique day. He would reflect upon his YK responsibilities and he would act out the offering up of the incense and the sacrifices.

The night before Yom Kippur he had to be in a state of absolute purity. He was kept awake by an entourage of Priests who ensured that he not sleep for fear that he render himself impure. The Mishnah in Yoma says that in order to keep him awake they (the elders) would read to him from three different books; Job, Ezra and Chronicles. The Bartenura commentary says that these were read because these subjects draw the heart of the listeners, so that sleep would not snatch him.

So the High Priest's role was one of agent for all Israel. He served as the emissary of the people before G-d. He had to be certain not to sleep. And as Jews we too have to guarantee that we stay spiritually awake throughout the year.

The three ways to achieve this are symbolised by the three books read to the High Priest on Yom Kippur night:

The first is the book of Job. This book speaks about Job, a righteous man who was blessed with children. But Job's life was struck with misfortune and bereavement. In a series of terrible blows he loses his wealth, health, and family all as a test of his faith. Job represents one way that Jews are brought to Shul. When G-d forbid, misfortune befalls a family, then the urge to come to Synagogue is felt, to say Kaddish or offer a prayer for healing. However this way of coming to G-d is negative- it means that something has to go amiss in order to come to Shul. It reminds me of the young lady I met who said that after the holocaust we have to identify as Jews otherwise we would be giving Hitler a posthumous victory. She's right but it is tremendously sad that a Jew is motivated by negative experience.

So if you do not want to read the Book of Job, then there is Ezra. Ezra was a national hero, a visionary. He lived at the time of the return of the Jews from Babylon, and started the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. He was also a great pioneer: He told people to come back to Torah study and remain faithful to Shabbat and Kashrut. In other words Ezra was a doer. He rebuilt Jewish life and rejuvenated the communities. In our communities we need those people who, like Ezra are ready to be pragmatic and build Jewish life.

Then there is the third way of keeping spiritually awake and that is The Book of Chronicles: This book records Jewish history, the lives and achievements of our leader and our unique history because as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has said that we have to be a people of memory to ensure our future, and Torah study is the way to guarantee Jewish continuity.

So here is the prescription to ensure we stay awake spiritually through the year. The choice is in our hands.