



## DIVREI MENACHEM

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# Yom Kippur's Moral Compass

Let us look at the reading from the Torah and Haftarah of Mincha on Yom Kippur through the eyes of Harav Yoseph B. Soloveitchik.

The Torah reading adjures us not to imitate the licentious practices of both Eretz Mitzrayim and Canaan and, in particular, not to uncover the nakedness of our close kin, [for] “I am the Lord” (Vayikra 18:1-6). In essence, this injunction prescribes that we are a people that, in spirit and action, desist from following the seductive ways of the surrounding cultures. We, the Jewish people, are a people that dwells alone.

This Torah reading on Yom Kippur afternoon was particularly germane at a time when [on Yom Kippur] the maidens of Yerushalayim went out in borrowed white dresses to the vineyards to dance in front of the young men who would choose one of them for themselves (cf. Mishnah Ta’anit 4:8).

In today’s world, the Rav suggests that we extrapolate this message to the technological and liberal societies that have become increasingly impersonal and mechanistic and open “to childlike and animal-like

sensuality that violates the spiritual dimension in man.” In any event, it seems appropriate that as Yom Kippur draws to an end and our thoughts begin to turn to the mundane, we check our unique Jewish and moral compass and ensure that we are heading in the right direction.

The Haftarah, notably, appears to take an entirely different turn. While emphasizing the importance of Teshuva, two aspects of Yonah’s story stand out. The first is that the episode relates not to a Jewish community but to one of the prodigal pagan cities of Yona’s time, Nineveh, the then capital of Assyria. As if to say, we are all Hashem’s subjects and that His mercy extends to all His creations, however sinful they are.

Second, the Book of Yonah records that Hashem saw that the residents of Nineveh “turned from their evil ways.” It does not say that God saw their ashes and fasting. For, ultimately, it is not the external dress that counts. Instead, what matters are the Middot that we exhibit inwardly and outwardly and our deeds. In the Rav’s words, specifically on Yom Kippur, we should not become overly obsessed with the expiatory sufficiency of fasting and ritual, but rather our Teshuvah should ultimately be expressed by the quality of our moral living and concern for humanity as a whole. ■

Shabbat Shalom! *Menachem Persoff*