

Kol Nidrei: “HONEY, YOU ARE IN CHARGE”

On the High Holidays, we come to shul and say, ‘G-d, You are the one in control—give us a good year.’ What does he want in return?

The Sweet Fantasy

Before the drawings of every huge lottery, when tens sometime hundreds of millions of dollars are being raffled off, people come to me and say, “Rabbi, pray for me that I should win and I’ll give a part of the money to Chabad.”

My typical answer is, “If this were a business venture you were getting into I’d surely pray for you, for I don’t do business. But why should I pray that you win the lotto and donate some of it. It would be wiser for me to buy my own ticket and pray that I should win all of it!”

What is the attraction of the lottery? Why do people run to buy tickets when they know full well that their chances of being picked are basically nil? I once heard that you have a better chance of throwing a coin from the top of the Empire State building into a can on the ground than you have to win a lotto for which hundreds of millions of tickets were bought. So why do we keep trying?

The simple explanation is that the few minutes of fantasizing about what you would do with all that money if you did win is

worth the dollar you spent on the ticket. But I think there is something deeper at play here.

Yom Kippur Lottery?

You've all heard the term 'Scapegoat.' Does anyone know where it comes from?

The name of this holiday, Yom Kippur, has the Persian (turned Hebrew) word for lottery, '*Pur*', in it. The only time a lottery was performed in the Temple was in the Yom Kippur service.

On Yom Kippur two goats were brought to the High Priest, and set before him side by side. He would then put his hands into a box and pull out two little papers and place them, without looking, on the heads of the two goats. The goat that got the paper with the word "*laHashem*" (to G-d) on it one would be sacrificed on the Altar and the goat that got the paper reading "*la'azazel*" (to hell) would be thrown off a cliff to atone for the Jewish people's sins. This goat that atones for the sins of the whole nation, is where the term Scapegoat originated.

There is another Yom Kippur-lottery connection. In the story of Jonah, which is read every year on Yom Kippur, when a storm threatened to sink the ship Jonah had boarded to flee his responsibility, the sailors made a lottery to figure out who is the cause of the storm. Of course, the short straw fell to Jonah and they threw him off the boat and we all know the rest of the story.

A Sign From G-d

Why is Yom Kippur so connected with the idea of lotteries?

Football games start with a lottery, a coin toss, but Yom Kippur? What is so special about lotteries?

When the Jewish people entered the land of Israel Joshua had to divide the land among the tribes. He and Elazar the high priest asked the Urim v'Tumim to allot portions of land to each tribe and announced which portion each tribe was allotted.

Yet the people weren't satisfied with the decision of the two prophets, so they made a lottery and found that the lottery said the same thing as the Urim v'Tumim.

Why the lottery?

Our sages have said, "A lottery comes directly from G-d, hence, violating a lottery is like violating the Ten Commandments." When a lottery is drawn and certain things are given to certain people nobody gets upset. The reason is because we all know that no human interfered in any way. Lotteries transcend logic—so we withdraw our sense of logic from it.

This is the reason why, for example, when a guy is about to enter a new business that some say is a gold mine while others say is a bottomless pit, some Jews will randomly open a Chumash and try to find an answer in the very first verse of the very first page they turn to.

By opening the Chumash and finding their answer there they feel they've received a sign from G-d. In a way they are relinquishing control of their destiny to G-d. They are in effect saying, "I can't make this decision on my own, G-d, You are now in control."

The Yearly Deal

This is essentially what we're doing here in shul today. Someone who thinks that he is in control of his own destiny, that the amount of money he makes throughout the year depends solely on how hard he works or that his health depends on how consistently he takes his vitamins and how much he exercises, has no reason to show up in shul on Yom Kippur.

Everyone who is here knows that although we must do whatever is within our power to earn a living and to stay healthy, ultimately, it all comes from G-d. And this is why we gather in shul on Yom Kippur, to hand over the control of our lives to Him, to confirm the fact that He rules our destiny.

But this is not a one-way street. It's more like a marriage where both partners have to hand over some of the control of their lives to the other. From the ceremony on, his decisions affect her destiny and vice versa.

On Yom Kippur we acknowledge that our health and prosperity are in His hands but we're also acknowledging that He has handed over some of the control to us.

Contrary to conventional thinking that how much money we make is in our control while how much spirituality our lives will have is in G-d's control, Torah says "Everything is in the hands of heaven except the fear of heaven." This means that G d doesn't decide how much charity we will give or how many times we will attend shul. G-d doesn't interfere in our choice between good and evil.

So today, as we pray to G-d for a good year physically and we tell G-d, "Honey, you're in charge." We must also commit to doing our very best in the areas we control because He answers us, "Honey, you're in charge." So let's do our part to ensure a strong healthy relationship.