



All for One and One for All

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are days in which people tend to focus on their own situations – their personal judgment and working to achieve their individual atonement. But a close look at the prayers for both of these days makes it clear that we should not be thinking only of ourselves. All of the prayers are in plural: זְכַרְנוּ לַחַיִּים – Remember us for life, כְּתִבְנוּ לַחַיִּים – Inscribe us for life, הַחַיִּירָנוּ בַתְּשׁוּבָה – Bring us back in repentance, etc.

Why are these prayers in the plural and what does this teach us about how to approach these days?

Moshe begins Parashat Nitzavim, which is always read on the Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah, by saying “You are standing here today all of you in front of *Hashem* your G-d, your heads, your tribes, your elders, and your policemen, every man in Israel” (Devarim 29:9). The Zohar teaches that “today” refers to Rosh Hashanah (see Rashi to Iyov 1:9). The Midrash Tanchuma explains that “every man in Israel” connotes that all Jews are held accountable for the sin of just one person. When Achan sinned and took from the spoils of Yericho, G-d said, “Israel has sinned” (Yehoshua 7:11), thus incriminating all Jews in the sin of one man. The Midrash goes on to explain that if we, as a nation, bear such great responsibility for the sin of an individual, all the more so are we judged favorably for the good deeds of one person. That is how we stand before G-d on Rosh Hashanah.

According to this Midrash, there really is no such thing as individual judgment and repentance. We are all responsible for one another and we are all in this together. So the prayers must be in the plural because we cannot succeed in judgment or achieve atonement alone, and as long as others are sinning we cannot be completely purified.

But there is another level to understanding the plural language, which does relate to our individual, personal situations. The Torah teaches that as part of the *mitzvah* of *Eglah Arufa* – when a murdered body is found near a city, the elders of the city must declare, “our hands did not spill this blood” (Devarim 21:7). Do we actually suspect that the elders of the city murdered this person? Why must they make this proclamation?

The Gemara in Sotah (45b) explains that this relates to the *mitzvah* of *levaya* – escorting a person out of the city. Since this accompaniment serves as a protection for the traveler during his journey, the elders proclaim they did not knowingly allow this deceased person to leave the city limits without an escort. But how does escorting the person a few cubits per the halachic requirement serve as a protection?

The Maharal explains that the purpose of the *mitzvah* of *levaya* is to demonstrate that this is not really a lone person walking the roads but rather one who is part of the community. In turn, he is judged as a member of the community and receives the merit of the community as a whole.

Thus, the elders swear they afforded this deceased person that protection and his murder was not a result of their negligence in this regard.

As human beings, we are prone to sin and that sin should draw harsh Divine judgment and punishment. But that is only if we are being judged as individuals. As long as a person is viewed as a member of the broader Jewish community, he has the protection of the community during the Divine judgment.

Thus, our only hope to survive the judgment of Rosh Hashanah and achieve atonement on Yom Kippur is if we see ourselves as and others as part of the community. This is why the prayers are in the plural. They remind us not to focus on ourselves but to see ourselves as part of the nation, which is the key to G-d hearing our prayers.

As we prepare for the High Holidays, let us recommit to being givers who always think about the needs of others and the community. Additionally, let us remember that we are responsible for one another and try to inspire those around us. In the merit of these two efforts, may we be blessed as individuals and as a community with a *כְּתִיבָה וְחַתִּימָה טוֹבָה*.

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