

# Thoughts on Yom Kippur

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## Hashem's Special Portion

***All the commandments of the Torah, both the obligations and prohibitions, if a person violates one of them, whether intentionally or unintentionally, when one repents, one is obligated to confess before the L-rd – He is blessed. [This is] as it says: When a man or woman commits any sin that men commit, to trespass against Hashem, and that soul is guilty, then he shall confess his sin which he has done...<sup>1</sup>***

***This confession is a positive commandment. (Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 1:1.)***

### I. Confessing sins

Rambam explains that when a person violates one of the Torah's commandments, they must repent and confess the sin. In his *Sefer HaMitzvot*, he explains that one who brings a sacrifice to atone for a sin is required to confess his sin over the sacrifice. Without the confession, the sacrifice does not atone. However, one should not conclude that confession is only needed when a sacrifice is offered. Confession is mandatory even when no sacrifice is required, or there is no *Bait HaMikdash* – Sacred Temple – to offer the sacrifice. Rambam writes:

*It is made clear to you from what we have cited that confession is itself a mitzvah and an obligation upon the sinner for any sin that he commits,*

*whether in the Land of Israel or outside of the Land, whether he brings a sacrifice or does not bring a sacrifice. [In all instances] he is obligated to confess. (Rambam, Sefer HaMitzvot, positive commandment 73)*

Rambam makes three points.

- Confession is required in response to the violation of any *mitzvah*.
- Whether the violation occurred in the Land of Israel or outside it, confession is required.
- Whether or not one brings a sacrifice to atone for the sin, confession is required.

It is easy to understand Rambam's reason for explaining that all violations require confession.<sup>2</sup> One may think that we are required to confess only when we violate more serious commandments but not if we violate minor ones. Conversely, we might think that when we violate more serious commandments, the consequences are more severe, and confession is inadequate to atone for the sin.

It is also necessary for Rambam to explain that we must confess our violations even when we are not required or cannot offer a sacrifice. We should not assume that confessing is part of the process of offering a sacrifice for atonement. This would lead us to conclude that our confession is only required and meaningful when made over the sacrifice. To prevent us from making this error, Rambam

<sup>1</sup> Sefer BeMidbar 5:6-7.

<sup>2</sup> Rambam bases his position on the Midrash. He is summarizing the position of the Sages of the Talmud.

explains that even when a sacrifice is unnecessary or cannot be offered, we must confess our sins.

## II. Sins committed in and outside the Land

However, why does Rambam tell us that we must confess our sins committed in the Land of Israel and those committed outside of it? Why would we think there is a distinction between sins committed in the Land of Israel and those committed outside? Furthermore, if we distinguish between these sins, which would we assume must be confessed – those committed in the Land of Israel or those committed outside of it?

This last question is easily answered. If we distinguished, we would conclude that only sins committed in the Land of Israel require a confession. The Torah explains that we confess over sacrifices brought for atonement. These can only be offered in the *Bait HaMikdash*. So, we know that sins committed in the Land of Israel require confession. But we might assume that those committed outside do not.

The question remains: Why would we assume that sins committed outside of the Land do not require a confession?

***And Hashem rained brimstone and fire upon Sedom and Amorah, from Hashem, from the heavens. He overturned those cities, the entire plain, all the cities' inhabitants, and the land's vegetation. (Sefer Beresheit 19:24-5)***

## III. The destruction of Sedom

Sefer Beresheit describes the destruction of Sedom and the surrounding communities. They were destroyed because of the wickedness of their inhabitants. Ramban – Nachmanides – notes that Sedom was not unique. Indeed, there have been

other wicked communities or societies that were not so thoroughly destroyed. Why was Sedom condemned to utter annihilation? He responds that the Land of Israel is Hashem's portion, and it does not endure abomination – depraved wickedness.<sup>3</sup>

Rav Yisrael Meir Kagan – the Chafetz Chayim – explained this with a parable. A person living far from St. Petersburg initiated malicious rumors about the Tzar. The Tzar became aware of the defamation and ordered that person's punishment. Another person traveled to St. Petersburg. He gained entry into the courtyard of the Tzar's residence and loudly insulted him. Both of these subjects of the Tzar made the same accusation against him. But the second person was far more severely punished.

Why was the second person punished more severely? Both made the same denunciations. Both rebelled against their monarch. The answer is that the second person added a dimension to his rejection of the Tzar's authority. He insulted the Tzar in his residence. He ridiculed him to his face. He added the element of contempt to his act of rebellion.

Chafetz Chayim explained that when we sin outside of the Land of Israel, we deny Hashem's authority. We deserve to be punished for our trespass. But when we disregard Hashem's Torah in the Land of Israel, we add an element to our sin. We are sinning in His courtyard. The Land of Israel is His particular portion. We add brazenness and provocation to our sin. The sin is more significant, and the consequences more severe.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), *Commentary on Sefer Beresheit* 19:5.

<sup>4</sup> Rav Shmuel Greenman, *Sefer Chafetz Chayim al HaTorah*, p 100.

#### IV. The obligation to confess.

Now, we can understand Rambam's reasoning. The Torah tells us we must confess every sin – even those committed outside the Land of Israel. Otherwise, we would not assume that we must confess sins committed outside the Land. A sin committed in the Land of Israel is a greater affront. We might conclude that only this more contemptible sin requires our confession. Therefore, the Torah tells us that all sins must be confessed – even those committed outside the

Land. Our confession is necessary because we violated the Torah and not because of the degree of affront to Hashem.

Our violation of the Torah engenders the obligation to confess. Hashem commanded us to fulfill its *mitzvot*. When we violate them, we disregard or act contrary to His will. This obligates us to repent and confess our sins before Him. The degree to which we have affronted Him is irrelevant – only that we have neglected His Torah.

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