

## Neilah Drush - 5768

*By Rabbi Yossi Michalowicz*

### Part 1 – Before the Silent Amidah: Are We All Ganovim?

We are about to start the fifth and final Amidah service. We are now reaching the pinnacle of Yom Kippur, and, indeed, the entire 40 day period of the High Holiday season. These are our parting words to the Almighty, before He puts his seal on everything we did that made up the year 5767, and what will project into the year 5768.

The holy Rabbis tell us that the time of Shalosh Seudos [third meal on Shabbos afternoon] is the time that the Talmud is referring to as, "Better one hour of Teshuvah and good deeds in this world than the entire life of the World to Come." It is at a level of the "righteous sitting with their crowns on their heads and taking pleasure from the splendour of the Divine Presence." This is especially true as we are about to recite the Neilah service during the time of Shalosh Seudos.

In this most unique and special prayer, you will notice something much different in this Amidah than the rest. The confessions of the first 4 Amidah prayers contained the lengthy version of the 44 'Al Cheit' statements. We confess everything from A-Z. But in this Amidah, instead of the lengthy 'Al Cheit' statements, we only say one confession. You will find it in your Artscroll Siddur on bottom of page 720 and on the top of page 722.

It says: "You taught us Hashem, our G-d, to confess before You, regarding all our sins 'Le'ma'an Nechdal May'oshek' – so that we can withdraw our hands from oppression." In simple English it means: "***That we should stop stealing.***" That we should stop being a Ganof – a thief.

The Gerrer Rebbe [Chidushei Harim]" asks: "Is every Jew a Ganof?" Is this the one sin that every Jew at Neilah should confess? After a whole day of a multitude of confessions, and it all comes down to theft? When was the last time you stole? When was the last time you shoplifted? We are saying this so that, as the prayer continues in the next paragraph: "*Now You gave us this with love this Day of Atonement, a deadline, pardon, a forgiveness for all our iniquities, so that we withdraw our hands from oppression and return to You, to carry out the decree of Your will, wholeheartedly.*" Is this what it's all about? We're thieves? We're Ganovim? All the "Al Cheit's" over the whole year, boil down to us being thieves? And without this – we can not serve you wholeheartedly? How do we understand this?

He answers with a parable. We will give it a contemporary spin. There are engineering firms who send out scouts to offer talented high school students free university education that will train them to be engineers, with the condition that they promise to work for that company after graduation. Let's say a student takes them up on this offer, gets the university degree, works for the company, and on his first day at work, he spends it doodling on a pad of paper instead of working. What sin is that person guilty of? He is a Ganof! All the money they invested in him to get the degree – he stole. The bargain was that the free education comes to him if he will work for them, as compensation for the free education – and he is not working for the firm!

Says the Gerrer Rebbe, that G-d has invested in us a lot more than just money. He gave us a body, a soul, all kinds of talents; and he asks that we accomplish that which we were brought here to do.

This is what we talked about on Rosh Hashanah: that G-d judges us in terms of having completed our mission in life. Comes Neilah, we look back over the year, and we see that not only have we sometimes not worked for G-d's firm – sometimes we even work for the competition! Some even become a Cardinal! ***So we aren't giving G-d a return on all the investment that He put into us! So then what are we? Ganovim!*** So in Neilah, we say to G-d that “we promise not to steal in the coming year!” We will stop stealing the investment that you made in us, and start using what you invested according to the conditions that you gave it to us.

Comes Neilah, and we humbly acknowledge that after all is said and done, the most important thing we need to do in life, and the most compelling reason we have to persuade G-d to grant us another year of life – is that we can no longer avoid accomplishing our unique mission in life. We have to focus all our energies to why G-d has really given us life – to finish the unique mission He gave us. To stop running away from that mission – the way Jonah did when G-d asked him to go to Ninveh, as we just read by Mincha. To stop making excuses, and do that most challenging, and yet rewarding, thing in life – to dig deep into our hearts, and finally agree to do the unique mission G-d wants us to do. To be true to ourselves, and be that unique beacon of light to the rest of the world. Only then can we carry out His will wholeheartedly.

And you may be wondering, “What is my mission in life?” The answer is: exactly the things you have been struggling all your life with! Exactly all the things that you beat your chest the hardest! The areas of your past failures are precisely the areas G-d has sent you down to perfect. Like, for example, your mother-in-law! Yes, you can get along with everyone in the world – but not your mother-in-law! Then that is one of your missions in your life – to get along with her! Or, how about your temper? You are a great person, but you can not control your temper. So instead of saying, “I am a great person, but I only have one flaw – I get angry too often,” you should say that this is my purpose in life – to control my temper, and channel that powerful emotion into a passion for G-d and truth! I know it is not easy – but that is obviously why G-d has put you on this planet – to take that raw, unrefined diamond of yourself, polish it, and return it sparkling to G-d. We have talked about happiness on Rosh Hashanah – this is the only way. We can only do things wholeheartedly and with enthusiasm if it is indeed our life's mission. This is what we need to be thinking about during our silent Amida.

Let me close with a story from an unlikely source. It is called “The last leaf” written by Oh Henry. The Story revolves around 3 main characters, Johnsy, Sue, and Berman. Johnsy and Sue were friends and were living in the same house. They had similar interests in art and had a studio for themselves. Mr. Berman is an old painter who used to live in the ground floor of the same building. He is a big boozier and always talks about some masterpiece which he is intending to do.

In the cold winter of November, Johnsy is attacked with Pneumonia and it gets so severe that the doctor tells Sue about the chances of Johnsy's survival is one in ten and that one chance is her want-to-live. When Sue gets back to the room, she finds Johnsy counting something looking at the window. When Sue asks her as to what she was doing, Johnsy replies telling she is counting the leaves in the Ivy vine on the brick wall outside the window and she is sure she'd die by the time the last leaf falls from the vine. Sue gets very irritated to hear this but feels very helpless at the state of her dear friend on whom even the doctors had lost hope.

Sue comes to Mr. Berman's house to ask him to pose for some of her painting which she was supposed to do for an advertising agency. She finds Berman stinking strongly with his gin, and one

corner lay his white canvas which is waiting since years to receive his masterpiece. Berman learns from Sue about Johnsy's pneumonia and the story of her last leaf of the Ivy vine and laughs at it. That night, Sue makes Berman pose like a hermit for her painting but finds the gusting wind and a forceful rain which makes Berman head back home.

The next day Johnsy wakes up with a sure thought that the last leaf in the vine would have fallen because of the rain which had poured all night, but for her surprise finds it clinging to its vine strongly. The same story repeats for another two days and Johnsy starts sensing that something has made the last leaf stay strong at its stem, which may be giving her a message that she was wrong looking forward to die. And this sudden realization, the want to live, makes her overcome her fears and she starts recovering from her disease. Now let us hear what Sue tells Johnsy in the last lines of the story:

"I have something to tell you, white mouse," she said. "Mr. Behrman died of pneumonia to-day in the hospital. He was ill only two days. The janitor found him the morning of the first day in his room downstairs helpless with pain. His shoes and clothing were wet through and icy cold. They couldn't imagine where he had been on such a dreadful night. And then they found a lantern, still lighted, and a ladder that had been dragged from its place, and some scattered brushes, and a palette with green and yellow colors mixed on it, and - look out the window, dear, at the last ivy leaf on the wall. *Didn't you wonder why it never fluttered or moved when the wind blew? Ah, darling, it's Behrman's masterpiece - he painted it there the night that the last leaf fell.*"

In Behrman's attempt to save someone else, he managed to save himself. Although he died, he did become what he had always claimed to be, an artist. His final masterpiece, which saved Johnsy's uninspired life, was nothing more than a simple leaf painted upon a drab brick wall!

Most of the times we are trying to be Johnsy's just fearing about the last leaf, we often forget to love the life G-d has given us. Being Berman's is quite not possible for everyone, but at least we can LIVE our life by not just waiting for that Last Leaf...

Ladies and Gentlemen, the last rays of sunlight are falling on this Yom Kippur – time is running out – ***please think hard about your masterpiece of life that you are prepared to paint after Yom Kippur – your life's mission – stop being a Ganof with G-d's talents, don't just wait for the last leaf to fall!***

### Part 2 – Before the Repetition of the Amidah: Creating a Communal Masterpiece

On Rosh Hashanah, we quoted the Talmud which teaches us how G-d judges us as "B'nei Maron" - which means judging us like sheep, climbers, and soldiers. That G-d judges us in terms of where we are now, in relationship to our past, and in terms of achieving our mission in life. However, there is one more line in that section of the Talmud. It concludes: "'Rav Yochanan said: 'Vekulan Niskarin Biskira Achas' - [All the same,] they are all viewed together... [as it says,] 'He fashions their hearts TOGETHER, He who considers ALL their deeds.'"

The Talmud says that besides the individual judgment, there is a communal judgment. You are not the only person in the world – there are other sheep, climbers, and soldiers. How do you relate to them? Were you a good sheep, climber, and soldier as part of the community? G-d judges how we relate to the three aspects of community:

1. Kahal
2. Eidah
3. Yisrael

There is a communal aspect of a “Kahal” – a Kehilla, which means that when a group of people congregate together and do a Mitzvah together, it is a greater honour to G-d, the King. The Talmud says that you can not compare an individual doing a Mitzvah as opposed to a multitude of people doing a Mitzvah. It is like comparing the impact of a single match to that of a large torch – the latter can illuminate in a much stronger way. So not only is G-d judging us in terms of our individual level as a sheep, He is judging us in terms of how much we have joined in with the community in doing good things that make a greater impact on the world. Basically, are you there when the community is doing things? Do we feel comfortable praying with the community, sharing in its Simchah as well as with its suffering?

There is a second communal aspect of an “Eidah”, which is an organized, orderly, community, where everyone respects the person above them and leads the person below them. And we, the climbers, are judged on how we relate to the people who are above and below our level. Yes, you may have grown 10 levels this year, but did you help the people below you move up levels too? What example did you set for others? How did you react to the other climbers? Did you admire the people above you, thereby giving them encouragement, or did you call them extremists and fanatics, which served to weaken them? The word “Eidah” comes from the word “Eid,” which means a witness. Such a community testifies to the same goal, as they are all climbing in an orderly fashion.

And finally there is the communal aspect of “Yisrael.” Yes, we are all soldiers with a unique mission, and you know the role that you must play; but it must be synchronized with everyone else’s part in the play. G-d judges how well you coordinated your part with the others; because you are a soldier fighting together with other soldiers. We must synchronize our unique mission with the others.

They tell the story of a person who asked the Chofetz Chaim the following question: “Why are there so many different groups within the Jewish people? We have the Sefardim and Ashkenazim. We have the Chasidim and the non-Chasidim. Within the Chasidim, there are so many different types, etc? And everyone does their own thing? Why can’t we all be one happy family?” The Chofetz Chaim responded that he should go ask the Czar of Russia why he has so many different branches in the military – the army, navy, ground troops, cavalry, etc. –can’t they have one type of soldier – wouldn’t it make that type stronger? The obvious answer is that indeed that particular unit would be stronger and win many battles, but the Czar would lose the war.

Similarly, we are all in G-d’s army, and in order to successfully win the spiritual battles involved in Tikun Olam, we need many different divisions within His army. Each one excels in one aspect of service of the king – some in prayer, others in kindness, yet others in Torah study. They are all valuable, and must all coordinate their efforts in winning the over all war that will bring perfection to the world. This is the destiny of Am Yisrael – the nation that in “Yashar E-I” – “straight unto G-d.”

We have finished our silent Amidah, and we have done Teshuvah on an individual basis to stop stealing from the talents G-d gave us, and focus on our unique individual mission. We now will begin the repetition of the Amidah, which is designed for the community. In this next hour, we will show G-d how we can live as part of a Kehilla, as part of an Eidah, and as part of Yisrael. We, as a Kahal – a congregation - will all do the same Mitzvah of praying and singing together in this room. Yes, we are all on different levels, but that is the beauty of our community – our Eidah – we all encourage and admire each other for the mountains that we are all climbing. There are those of us who know how to sing really well and others who are novices. Let us encourage each other to sing together, and once again be the place in Thornhill where heaven and earth are totally linked as one. Let the experienced ones put their arm around a newcomer and encourage him/her. Let no one sit back and passively discourage the others who so genuinely wish to connect to G-d at this most special moment. Share your Machzor with someone who may not have one. Let us all bring testimony to G-d that we are all climbing together. And finally, as Yisrael, we will all find a unique way to get involved. Some of us know the words, some of us can hum along, and some of us can sway, clap, and even dance. Yes – the beauty of our community is that we are the most cosmopolitan and accepting Shul in the GTA. No where else can you see so many Jews of all stripes together in one sanctuary – all focused on spending these holiest moments of the year as one unified army of soldiers. No one is looking at how the other person is dressed, how they got here, or where they came from – but we are all here together for the same objective.

Let us truly inspire ourselves, and during this hour, of Teshuvah and good deeds done out of love, take the liberty of dreaming of how we can continue this tremendous feeling throughout the year. How we wish to actively meld our individuality as part of this communal masterpiece – be it in coming to prayers more often, coming to classes, getting involved in Chesed projects, helping others, joining our Shul as a member, being part of our building campaign – you name it – and in this merit, we should all experience the concluding words of “Leshana Haba’a Bi’rushalayim!