

The Holy Helplessness of Yom HaKippurim

Tohu deKedushah and the Hope That Is Born Beyond Hope

Yom HaKippurim is usually described as the most ordered day of the Jewish year. Its prayers are fixed, its confessions carefully arranged, and its prohibitions clearly defined. In the time of the *Beit HaMikdash*, the *avodat hayom* unfolded through an exact sequence in which every immersion, garment, confession, lottery, offering, sprinkling, and movement had its appointed place. Nothing could be improvised. The entire life of *Klal Yisrael* depended upon the *Kohen Gadol* carrying out the service with perfect precision.

Yet hidden within that supreme order was an encounter with something that no order could contain. The *Kohen Gadol* entered the *Kodesh HaKodashim*, the place where ordinary distinctions dissolved before the absolute presence of *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*. At the same time, another part of the service moved away from the Temple, beyond the ordered boundaries of human habitation, into the wilderness with the *se'ir la'Azazel*. The most structured day of the year therefore reached its deepest point at the edge of structure itself. The perfected vessels of *tikkun* carried *Klal Yisrael* to the threshold of *tohu*.

This paradox opens the inner *avodah* of the day. The chaos of *Yom HaKippurim* is not the chaos of a person who never built a life, never accepted responsibility, and never learned how to serve Hashem with steadiness. It is the higher *tohu* that becomes possible only after the vessels have been built. A person begins in confusion, works toward order, and then discovers that even the highest human order cannot grasp the ways of Hashem. The first unknowing is immaturity. The final unknowing is the humility born from knowledge itself. This is *tachlit hayediah shelo neda*: the culmination of knowing is to know that we do not know.

The day therefore asks us to make a movement that appears impossible. We must enter as responsible human beings who have prepared, repaired, confessed, and resolved to change, yet within the innermost chamber we must surrender the fantasy that our preparations can produce our own *kapparah*. We do everything we can, and then we admit that what must finally be done cannot be done by us. That admission is not a rejection of *avodah*. It is the completion of *avodah*. Human effort builds the vessel; holy helplessness opens it to the light that only Hashem can give.

The *yahrtzeiten* associated with *Yom HaKippurim* and its departure bring this secret into focus. The *Ba'al HaSulam*, Rav Yehudah Leib Ashlag, and Reb Osher Freund each taught in his own language that a person reaches genuine prayer only when the confidence in self-salvation has been exhausted. Their teachings are severe because they expose how deeply the self tries to occupy the very place that belongs to Hashem. They are also filled with compassion because once the illusion of self-sufficiency falls away, failure no longer has to become shame. It can

become *chisaron*, and *chisaron* can become *tefillah*. The broken place is no longer proof that Hashem has abandoned the person. It becomes the place in which the person finally discovers that there was never anything but Hashem.

The Three Movements From Chaos to Order and Back

There is a *tohu* beneath *tikkun* and a *tohu* beyond *tikkun*, and confusing the two distorts the entire teaching. The lower *tohu* is the instability of a life without vessels. A person is ruled by impulse, flooded by contradiction, and unable to remain faithful to a direction. That condition must not be romanticized. Torah asks us to build *kelim*: habits, obligations, boundaries, clarity, accountability, and a self capable of keeping its word. The passage from this first chaos into *tikkun* is a genuine spiritual achievement.

Once that order has been built, however, it can harden into a subtler form of exile. The person begins to identify with the vessels and to imagine that the map of spiritual life is the territory itself. Because he understands the categories, he believes he understands Hashem. Because he performs the correct actions, he assumes that he controls their result. Because he has learned the path of *teshuvah*, he approaches *Yom HaKippurim* with an account of what he has accomplished and what he should therefore receive. The tools that once rescued him from chaos become a defense against dependence.

The higher *tohu* begins when that defense is released. The vessels remain, but they no longer pretend to contain the Infinite. This is the meaning of *orot de-tohu be-kelim de-tikkun*: the vast lights of *tohu* received within vessels strong enough not to shatter. The person does not abandon halachah, discipline, moral responsibility, or the work of change. He carries them all into a more radical humility. He knows the order and faithfully serves within it, while knowing that the One he serves exceeds every order he knows.

The difference can be stated through three stages. At first, a person says, “I do not know,” because he has not yet learned. He then says, “I know,” because he has labored to acquire wisdom and stability. Finally, he says, “I do not know,” because wisdom itself has revealed its limit. The first statement is empty of knowledge; the last is full of everything knowledge has taught. Kohelet gives voice to this mature bewilderment: *Amarti echkamah vehi rechokah mimeni*, I said that I would become wise, but wisdom remained distant from me. The greater the circle of light, the greater the perimeter of darkness it reveals.

This is why the higher *tohu* cannot be reached by bypassing *tikkun*. A person cannot call avoidance surrender or call confusion transcendence. The one who refuses to act has not necessarily relinquished control; often he remains controlled by fear. Holy helplessness comes after honest effort. It is the recognition that although action is demanded of us, salvation does not originate in us. We are responsible for the vessel, but we are not the source of the light.

The Kohen Gadol Between Adam and Lo Adam

The *Kohen Gadol* embodies this movement in its most concentrated form. No one could enter the *Kodesh HaKodashim* casually. He entered only on the holiest day, through the holiest service, after exacting preparation. His every action declared the dignity of *adam*: the human

being capable of sanctifying the body, time, clothing, speech, and movement. He did not wander into mystery. He approached it through obedience.

Yet the Torah also describes the inner chamber in a language that leaves room for the startling teaching of Chazal: no *adam* was present in the *Ohel Moed* when the *Kohen Gadol* entered to effect atonement. The man who entered had to become, in some sense, *lo adam*. He crossed the threshold as a fully prepared person, but he could not remain enclosed within his human identity. Before the Infinite, the self that knows, manages, possesses, and deserves had to disappear.

This does not mean that the *Kohen Gadol* ceased to be responsible for the service. It means that responsibility itself was purified of ownership. He performed the *avodah*, but the *kapparah* was not his achievement. He entered with all the vessels of *tikkun* and discovered within them a heart that no vessel could master. R' Yitzchak Meir Morgenstern's reading of *besulat Yisrael* as containing the letters of *lev tohu* expresses this inner point. Beneath all the accumulated history, wisdom, sin, merit, and repair of Israel remains a virginal place, a heart not yet mastered by explanation. The *Kohen Gadol* enters that heart of *tohu* and stands before Hashem as if nothing has yet been said.

The paradox of *adam* and *lo adam* is therefore not a clever contradiction. It describes the essential passage of the day. We spend the year constructing a human self capable of choosing, repairing, and serving. On *Yom HaKippurim*, that self reaches its holiest act by yielding its claim to ultimacy. The person does not vanish into irresponsibility. The illusion that the person is self-created and self-sustaining vanishes. What remains is a transparent *merkavah*, a life through which the will of Hashem can move.

The *se'ir la'Azazel* reveals the same secret from the opposite direction. The ordered service in the *Beit HaMikdash* cannot be understood without the animal sent into the wilderness, into the place beyond settlement and recognizable holiness. The day refuses to leave the chaotic, unwanted, and unassimilated parts of the soul outside its *avodah*. It leads them into the wilderness and returns them to their root. *Kapparah* does not come because we have successfully presented only the orderly self to Hashem. It comes when even the places that do not fit our spiritual self-image are included in the encounter.

Ki Kol Haam Bishgagah

When the fantasy of control collapses, a person often meets *ye'ush*. As long as the road appears linear, confidence is easy. If A leads to B and B leads to C, effort seems able to guarantee arrival. A person can then appear before Hashem with a spiritual ledger: these are my good deeds, these are my improvements, and this is the future I believe I have earned. Such a person may be sincere, but his prayer remains entangled with a claim. He does not merely ask Hashem for life; somewhere within, he explains why life is owed to him.

Yom HaKippurim breaks that ledger open. If we insist that we know, then our knowledge itself accuses us: if we understood so clearly, why did we live so differently? If we present ourselves as fully coherent agents, we must answer for every incoherence. The day therefore brings us to the verse *ki kol ha'am bishgagah*. We confess that sin is never simply the act of a

lucid self calmly choosing distance from its own Source. *Ein adam over aveirah ella im ken nichnas bo ruach shtus*, a person sins only when a spirit of folly enters him. Every sin contains a moment of madness in which the creature forgets the truth that gives it life.

This recognition must never be used to erase responsibility or excuse harm. *Teshuvah* requires confession, repair, restitution where possible, and a real commitment not to repeat the act. Yet shame insists that the failure reveals the deepest identity of the person; compassion sees that the failure arose from blindness, fear, compulsion, woundedness, or a desperate attempt to survive apart from the only Life that can sustain us. Responsibility says, "I must repair what I have done." Shame says, "What I have done is all that I am." *Yom HaKippurim* accepts the first and dissolves the second.

This is the holy "insanity plea" of the day. We do not claim that our actions have no consequences. We confess that the self which sinned was caught in *ruach shtus*, estranged from its own truth. We stand before Hashem and say: *Ribono shel Olam*, I thought I was an independent being who could secure himself, satisfy himself, and direct his own world. That belief was my madness. I acted within it, and I am responsible for returning from it, but only Your compassion can reach beneath the act and restore the person who became lost inside it.

The final words of *Avinu Malkeinu* express this movement with unbearable simplicity: *choneinu va'aneinu ki ein banu ma'asim; aseh imanu tzedakah va'chesed vehoshi'einu*. After every request and every effort to awaken merit, we arrive at the confession that we have no deeds upon which to make a claim. We do not say that we have literally performed nothing good. We say that even our goodness cannot purchase life from its Source. We ask for the gift as a gift. This is where judgment opens into *rachamim rabim*, because the person has stopped demanding that Divine compassion appear as the wage of human accomplishment.

Hashem's answer is *salachti*. Forgiveness does not declare that nothing happened. It declares that the sin does not possess the final word about what the person is. *Salachti* reaches the point beneath behavior, beneath explanation, beneath the managed identity that insists upon being either righteous or ruined. There the soul is still *besulah*, still capable of beginning, because its deepest life was never self-generated. The One who created it can create it again.

The Baal HaSulam and the Fullness of Chisaron

The *Ba'al HaSulam* teaches that the basic human condition is the *ratzon lekabel*, the will to receive for oneself. This is not a minor defect pasted onto an otherwise completed creature. It is the substance from which human *avodah* begins. The person experiences himself as a center, reads the world through need, and instinctively tries to draw everything into the orbit of the self. Left unexamined, even Torah and prayer can become instruments through which the self seeks security, importance, pleasure, or control.

The discovery of this condition can be devastating. A person may labor for years and then recognize that self-interest has accompanied him into every holy place. He may respond by intensifying self-hatred, as though violence against the self could free him from self-obsession. The *Ba'al HaSulam* points toward a different beginning: *hakarat hachisaron*, an honest

recognition of deficiency. The creature must cease pretending that it created its own nature or can heal that nature through the very ego that requires healing.

To accept *chisaron* does not mean to celebrate selfishness. It means to tell the truth about the material Hashem has given us to transform. The will to receive is the creature's hunger for life; its repair is not annihilation but a change of form, from receiving for oneself alone toward receiving in order to give. Such transformation begins only when the person stops claiming to stand outside the condition he hopes to change. As long as he imagines himself already pure, his *avodah* remains another expression of the self's need to admire itself.

The *Ba'al HaSulam* writes in his letters that there is no moment richer than the moment in which a person has exhausted his own strength and finally understands that his strength cannot save him. This teaching is easily misunderstood. It does not praise laziness or tell the person to surrender before acting. The decisive phrase is that he has done what he can. He has applied his mind, discipline, honesty, and effort, and the effort itself has brought him to the boundary of effort. Only there does his need become whole enough to become a whole prayer.

Before that point, prayer often functions as an assistant to a plan the person still controls. He asks Hashem to bless the strategy, strengthen the identity, and deliver the result already chosen. After the collapse of self-reliance, prayer changes its nature. The person no longer informs Hashem how salvation must look. He asks for *etzah* because he genuinely does not know. He asks for strength because he has discovered that strength is not private property. He asks for closeness because every other possession has become incapable of satisfying the need beneath his needs.

The story told about the *Ba'al HaSulam* before his ascent to *Eretz Yisrael* gives this teaching biographical force. Having felt that he had completed what he could accomplish where he was, he spoke as though no further *avodah* remained for him in this world. The pain of his family opened another possibility: in *Eretz Yisrael*, there might be new ground for service, a new *chisaron* through which life could continue. Whether read historically or inwardly, the movement is striking. Renewal did not come from proving that he already possessed more. It came from discovering another place in which he was needed and another deficiency through which Hashem could call him forward.

This is the fullness hidden in *chisaron*. A lack is painful because something is absent, but the absence also creates direction, longing, and relationship. A completely self-sufficient being could not pray, receive, love, or be transformed. The human being is created unfinished so that life may remain an encounter. The *Shechinah* dwells *bimkom hachisaron* because the unfilled place refuses to close itself against the Giver.

Reb Osher Freund and the Avodah of This Breath

Reb Osher Freund brings the same truth into the immediate texture of lived experience. His language repeatedly strips the person of grand spiritual fantasies and returns him to the point at which he actually stands. Left to myself, I become lost in myself. My calculations multiply, my fears acquire the appearance of wisdom, and my attempts to secure the future separate me from

the only moment in which Hashem is giving me life. The cure begins when I admit that I do not know how to carry even this moment without Him.

In *Imrei Osher*, the work is described as a stubborn willingness to remain present within one's pain while recognizing that the strength to remain is itself a gift from Hashem. This is not passive resignation. Passivity withdraws from the moment; Reb Osher's *shiflut* enters it completely. A person stops fleeing into explanations of why the pain should not exist, stops constructing an imaginary future in which he will finally become invulnerable, and asks for the ability to live faithfully inside the breath being given now.

Such smallness is a form of healing because it releases the body and soul from the impossible task of controlling the whole story at once. The mind may be blocked. The road may be hidden. The person may have no answer to the question of how everything will turn out. He still has this breath and the possibility of turning within it toward Hashem. The next right act may be very small, but smallness is no longer humiliation. It is the vessel proportionate to the light currently being given.

Reb Osher's helplessness therefore contains tremendous stubbornness. The person refuses to make his confusion into evidence that Hashem is absent. He refuses to interpret a fall as proof that the relationship has ended. In every *nefilah*, he searches for the concealed address of the One who is carrying him through it. He does not deny the darkness. He denies the darkness the authority to define what is ultimately true.

This is the mature form of *ye'ush de-kedushah*. Ordinary despair says that there is no source of help. Holy despair says that there is no source of help in me as an independent power. The first closes prayer; the second makes prayer possible. The first concludes that nothing can be done; the second asks Hashem to reveal the action that belongs to this moment. The words may sound similar, but they face in opposite directions.

The distinction is essential. A person in psychological crisis, addiction, danger, or overwhelming pain may need concrete assistance, treatment, protection, and the loving intervention of other people. Those forms of help are not rivals to trust in Hashem; they are among the vessels through which His help arrives. "I cannot save myself" does not mean "I must isolate myself." It means that I stop demanding that salvation originate within the closed circle of the self, and I become willing to receive it in the form Hashem sends.

Yonah and the Descent Into the Hidden Chamber

The book of Yonah is read on *Yom HaKippurim* because Yonah's journey enacts the descent from knowing into holy unknowing. At the beginning, Yonah appears to understand the Divine calculation. He knows the likely result of his mission, fears the consequences of Nineveh's repentance for Israel, and attempts to escape the role assigned to him. His flight is not simple ignorance. It is the resistance of a prophet whose knowledge has become an argument against obedience.

Then the storm comes. The sea dismantles Yonah's calculation by placing him inside a reality he cannot manage. While the sailors labor above, Yonah descends to *yarketei hasefinah*, the recesses of the ship, and sleeps. His sleep can be read as avoidance, yet within the spiritual

architecture of the day it also anticipates surrender. The prophet who tried to run through knowledge is brought beneath knowledge. He descends into the ship, into the sea, and into the fish, each chamber deeper and narrower than the last.

Only from the belly of the fish does Yonah pray. The prayer does not arise when his plan remains available. It arises when every route of escape has closed and life itself is received as an impossibility. The descent becomes a concealed *Kodesh HaKodashim*: a place outside ordinary human control from which the word of Hashem can be heard again. Yonah is returned to the same mission, but he no longer returns as its author. He becomes its bearer.

The *Kohen Gadol* and Yonah therefore mirror one another. The *Kohen Gadol* enters inward into the most sacred chamber; Yonah is cast outward into sea and wilderness. One wears white garments and follows an exact service; the other is stripped of direction and swallowed by a creature of the deep. Yet both arrive at the limit of *adam*. Both enter a place where mastery cannot survive, and both emerge as messengers of life for others.

This is also why sleep appears as a charged image in the *avodah* of surrender. Chizkiyahu turns his face to the wall when confronted with a decree of death. Yonah descends and sleeps while the ship breaks around him. Sleep suspends the managing self. It resembles death, but it also permits a renewal that conscious effort cannot manufacture. On *Yom HaKippurim*, the white *kittel*, the withdrawal from eating and bodily mastery, and the closing gates of *Ne'ilah* bring the worshipper to a similar threshold. We do not abandon action; we allow Hashem to perform the surgery that action cannot perform upon itself.

Yom HaKippurim and Purim

The movement toward holy unknowing reaches beyond *Yom HaKippurim* into Purim. The well-known relationship between *Yom Kippurim* and *Purim* is more than a play on their names. Both days disclose salvation after the collapse of ordinary reason. On *Yom HaKippurim*, the person relinquishes food, comfort, possession, and the claims of the accomplished self. On Purim, the mind relinquishes its demand to understand the hidden governance of Hashem. The *inui* of one day and the *oneg* of the other open toward the same secret: life is received most deeply when the self ceases to treat itself as life's source.

In the Purim story, every visible calculation points toward catastrophe. The decree has been sealed, the machinery of empire has been activated, and Hashem's name does not appear in the Megillah. Salvation emerges through reversals that no character controls as a whole. Mordechai's knowing is therefore an *ad delo yada*, a knowing that makes room for what it cannot know. He acts with extraordinary courage and precision, yet he does not possess the script by which those actions will succeed.

The phrase *lo yode'a kelum* can be read as the initials of *kli*. The person who knows nothing becomes a vessel. This does not glorify stupidity. It describes the emptied knowing of someone who has learned, acted, and then released the demand that reality conform to his comprehension. A full cup cannot receive. The mind filled with its own explanations cannot notice the hidden path of salvation unfolding through events it would never have chosen.

The white simplicity of *Yom HaKippurim* and the intoxicated unknowing of Purim thus share an inner innocence. This innocence is not naïveté. It is what remains after sophistication has exhausted its claim to sovereignty. The person returns to childlikeness without becoming childish. He can think, discern, and act, yet at the root he rests upon Hashem as a child rests upon the one carrying it.

This sheds light on the words *selichah*, *mechilah*, and *kapparah*. Their initials form *samech*, the letter and root of support, of being upheld. Forgiveness is not merely the deletion of a record. It is the discovery that even while we were falling, we were not falling outside the One who sustains existence. To receive *selichah*, *mechilah*, and *kapparah* is to discover ourselves supported at the very point where self-support failed.

The Kav of Hope Within Holy Despair

The most daring claim in this entire path is that hope is born from the proper exhaustion of our own hopes. Human hope usually imagines a preferred future and then clings to it as the condition for trust. We hope that a particular door will open, a particular pain will end, a particular identity will be restored. These hopes are natural and often holy, but they can quietly become demands that Hashem save us only through the future we have designed.

When those designs collapse, the person feels that hope itself has disappeared. In truth, one form of hope has disappeared: the hope produced and controlled by the self. Beneath it waits a deeper *kivuy*, a line of longing that does not dictate its destination. *Ten tikvah tovah limyachalim lach* asks Hashem to give good hope to those who hope toward Him. The object of the deepest hope is not a scenario. It is Hashem Himself.

The language of the *kav* gives this insight a cosmic dimension. After the *tzimtzum* and the emergence of the *chalal hapanui*, the ray of Infinite light enters the apparent emptiness. The empty space is not filled by denying its emptiness; it becomes the place into which the line can extend. So too within the soul, *chisaron* becomes receptive when it stops trying to disguise itself as fullness. The person says: I do not possess the light, I cannot manufacture the light, and I cannot command its form. Precisely then, the empty place becomes available to the *kav Or Ein Sof*.

Holy despair is therefore not the death of hope but the clearing of its counterfeit. It releases the demand that my private imagination define redemption. Once that demand loosens, I can become a vessel for the hope Hashem is directing toward creation. My life is no longer sustained only by what I can foresee. It is sustained by the Divine desire that called me into being and continues to call me toward a future I cannot yet name.

This is the shared light of the *Ba'al HaSulam* and Reb Osher Freund. The *Ba'al HaSulam* exposes the will to receive that tries to make even salvation serve the self. Reb Osher trains the person to endure the present breath without escaping into self-made control. Together they teach that *chisaron* is not a sealed emptiness. It is the opening through which the *kav* enters. The person's admission "I cannot" becomes truthful only when it continues, "and therefore I turn to You."

From Neilah to the Sukkah

At *Ne'ilah*, the day contracts into a final simplicity. The gates are closing, the body is emptied, and language itself is reduced to the repeated cry *Hashem Hu HaElokim*. After a day filled with confession and liturgy, we arrive at words that contain no account of the self. We do not explain who we have become or what we deserve. We name the only Reality that remains when every claim has been exhausted.

The final *shofar* is the sound that follows this surrender. It is not articulate speech but breath forced through a narrow passage, a cry born where words end. It resembles the first cry of a child emerging from the concealed womb of *binah*. *Ne'ilah* closes around the worshipper like a *gan na'ul*, yet the closure becomes birth. The person who entered the day carrying an old identity emerges without a completed explanation, alive again because life has been given again.

From that cry we move almost immediately toward the *sukkah*. We begin to build because holy helplessness is never the final instruction to remain collapsed. Once the illusion of self-sufficiency has been surrendered, action returns in a gentler form. We take boards, branches, tools, and measurements. We build a fragile dwelling and call it the shelter of faith. The *sukkah* does not deny vulnerability; it turns vulnerability into a place of joy.

This sequence protects the teaching from every distortion. *Yom HaKippurim* does not teach that effort is meaningless, that wrongdoing carries no responsibility, or that despair should become a permanent home. It teaches that effort reaches truth only when it knows it cannot crown itself. Responsibility becomes redemptive when it is joined to compassion. Despair becomes holy only when it empties the false god of self-reliance and immediately opens into prayer. The *tohu* of the day must be held within *kelim de-tikkun*, and those vessels must carry us back into life.

We therefore enter the day as the *Kohen Gadol* entered: prepared, responsible, and stripped of ownership. We enter as Yonah entered the depths: unable to escape the mission and unable to complete it through our own wisdom. We enter with the *Ba'al HaSulam's* recognition of *chisaron* and with Reb Osher's fidelity to the breath in which Hashem is present. We bring our learning, our failures, our repair, our longing, and even our confusion, and we surrender the claim that any of them can force open the gates.

At the innermost point, all that remains is the prayer of the impoverished person: *Tefillah le'ani ki ya'atof velifnei Hashem yishpoch sicha*. The poor person pours out speech because he has nothing with which to bargain. His poverty becomes his honesty, and his honesty becomes his closeness. He does not ask to be excused from becoming a person. He asks to be recreated as a person who knows that every strength, every breath, and every beginning comes from Hashem.

Then the answer *salachti kidvarecha* can be heard in its full depth. Hashem does not merely permit us to continue after failure. He reveals that the place we experienced as the end of ourselves can become the beginning of relationship. The heart of *tohu* becomes the chamber of compassion. The collapse of private hope becomes the opening of Divine hope. The creature who has nothing discovers that it is being carried, and because it is being carried, it can rise, repair, build, and rejoice.

May we be *zocheh* to the *tohu de-kedushah* that comes after faithful *tikkun*, to the mature unknowing that is born from true wisdom, and to the *ye'ush de-kedushah* that empties us of false mastery without emptying us of courage. May we receive the strength to repair what we have damaged, the compassion to distinguish the soul from its failures, and the humility to ask for help in the form in which Hashem sends it. Through *selichah*, *mechilah*, and *kapparah*, may we discover the *samech* that has always upheld us, hear the word *salachti*, and carry its light from the white stillness of *Yom HaKippurim* into the simple joy of the *sukkah* and the complete light of the *geulah*.