

**Because of Thee!**  
**A Yom Kippur Response to September 11**  
**by Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer**

This was the worst Yom Kippur in my memory.

Not because of the community with which I worshipped; they were wonderful, warm, and welcoming.

Not because of the liturgical style; it was different from what I would have done, but it was warm and strong.

It was the events that surrounded – or, rather, preceded – Yom Kippur. And it was my reaction to those events. And it was triggered by one of the confessional litanies of Yom Kippur morning. And I wept.

*Al het shehatanu l'fanecha; al het shehatanu l'fanecha; al het shehatanu l'fanecha;*<sup>1</sup> for the sin which we have sinned before Thee. This year I will not, I cannot, bowdlerize the Hebrew from “sin” into “error” or “transgression” or “violation.”

Yes; the traditionally listed actions – hardness of the heart, utterance of the lips, immorality, failing to respect parents and teachers, impure lips – these I can reduce to errors, to missing the mark (for *het*, which we translate as *sin*, is a term that comes from the practice of archery and refers to missing the target). But there are also sins – deep, dark, deadly sins – which I have committed and whose significance I cannot bring myself to reduce by avoiding the word itself.

The “official” list of transgressions – I can acknowledge them as my own in some small way, either because I have personally done them in some minor ways or because “all Israel are responsible, one for another,” so that the failings of all the people of Israel fall upon every member of the House of Israel. But that’s not really personal; that’s not what drives me down into the depths.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the beginning of each line of the major confessional litany on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

A terrible event occurred sixteen days before Yom Kippur. Sixteen days; that's two periods of *brit milah*,<sup>2</sup> and on Yom Kippur I realized just how badly I had been cut. Not just a trim, not just the removal of the foreskin, but cut wide open, sliced, shredded, lacerated.

There is a lesson which is taught more succinctly by the Zen masters than by any other teachers I know. If a quality is present in anything in the Universe, they tell us, then it is present in everything in the Universe. If the shirt which I wear as I type these words is blue (and, since you are not watching me as I write, you'll just have to take my word that it is), then everything in the Universe – including that bright red fire engine, that aromatic yellow ethrog,<sup>3</sup> and the gloriously white kittel<sup>4</sup> which I wore on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur – has within it a degree of “blue-ness,” even if so small a degree that we cannot detect it though we use the strongest and most sophisticated scientific equipment.

On a physical level, that's a fairly easy lesson. I can state it; I can accept it; yet it does not affect my actions, my feelings, my world. It doesn't really matter if there is a degree of “blue-ness” in my white kittel, in the yellow ethrog, in the red fire engine; they will function in exactly the same way, whether they have that bit of blue or not. But the lesson, the concept, becomes far more problematic on a spiritual level.

A disciple of the Buddha, it is said, asked his master, upon seeing several scenes of violence, why these things occurred. “Because of thee!” the Buddha exclaimed.

And when I ask G\*d why the events of September 11 occurred, G\*d replies to me exactly as the Buddha replied to his disciple, “Because of thee!”

If a quality – whether physical, as blue-ness, or spiritual, as violence, hatred, and bigotry – exists anywhere in the Universe, then it exists everywhere in the Universe. If my shirt is blue, then there is blue-ness in everything in the Universe. And if the

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<sup>2</sup> *Brit Milah*, circumcision, occurs on the eighth day of a boy's life.

<sup>3</sup> The *ethrog* (in English, the citron) is a fruit which is joined with willow branches, myrtle leaves, and palm fronds and waved in the six directions – east, west, north, south, up, down – as part of the celebration of Succot, the Jewish festival which follows five days after Yom Kippur.

<sup>4</sup> The *kittel* is a white robe worn by some Jews on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (as well as certain other special occasions during the Jewish liturgical year).

perpetrators of the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center were hateful, were bigoted, were violent, then there is hatred, bigotry, and violence in everything in the Universe. Including me!

And, conversely, if the existence of a quality anywhere necessitates its existence everywhere, then the absence – the absolute absence – of that quality anywhere in the Universe will necessitate its absence everywhere in the Universe. If it is truly and wholly absent in one place, then it cannot exist anyplace.

Why were the Pentagon and the World Trade Centers attacked? Why were those thousands of people killed? Why are some people so consumed with hate that they would do such a thing? Because of me! Because there remains some hatred, some prejudice, some violence, in my heart, in my soul!

Any incident of hatred, any manifestation of violence, any example of prejudice, is G\*d's personal message to me that I, personally, have not yet done enough. Not that I haven't done enough to change the world, not that I haven't done enough to change those who call themselves my enemies, but that I haven't done enough to change me.

Our master and teacher Rebbe Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Apt,<sup>5</sup> in the ninth decade of his incarnation, declared (I paraphrase), "When I was twenty, I wanted to change the world. Eventually I realized that changing the world was too big a job for me, and so I decided that I would just change my nation. In my forties, I realized that changing my nation, too, was too great a task for me, and I sought to change my province. In my fifties, I realized that changing my province was too great a task for me, and I set out to change my city. In my sixties, I came to the realization that changing my city was too great a task, and I determined to change my neighborhood. In my seventies, I had to admit that changing my neighborhood was too great a task for me, and I planned to change my family. Now I am a man of over eighty years, and I understand that the only one I can change is myself, and I pray that that will not be too great a task for me."

May G\*d grant me the serenity to accept the people I cannot change, the courage to change the one I can, and the wisdom to know it is I.

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<sup>5</sup> Hassidic master, early nineteenth century, revered by virtually all Hassidic groups of his day, including those which were at odds with each other.