

## “Moving from Din to Rachamim”

Yom Kippur Sermon

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Yom Kippur is often called the holiest day of the year. It is certainly the best attended. And why does this holiday inspire such devotion? Certainly not because it is fun and joyous — there is a reason why we don't wish each other a “Happy Yom Kippur.” No, we often come to synagogue on Yom Kippur because we feel guilty — not just guilty because this is the one day when every Jew is *supposed* to be at services, but also because this day is all about judgment and atonement for our sins. We better be here, or else!

This is indeed an important day and it is often misunderstood. Yom Kippur is known biblically as Yom Hakippurim (the Day of Atonements) and Shabbat Shabbaton (the Sabbath of Sabbaths). The Talmud calls it simply Yoma, The Day. That's a lot of pressure to put on a single day! And for many of us, that pressure, the sheer weight of the day, makes us feel an overwhelming sense of judgment and guilt. This morning, I want to explore this the idea of *din*, of judgement, and what it says about our relationship with God, with one another and with ourselves. I hope that by the end of this day you'll look at today as less imposing and guilt-inducing and maybe even a little bit inspiring.

First, a secret. Rosh Hashanah, not Yom Kippur, is actually the *Yom HaDin*, the Day of Judgement. Our tradition says that we are judged not today, but on Rosh Hashanah. During the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we have a chance to change that judgement. Today is our last chance, one last opportunity to tip the scales towards the good. Tonight, at sunset, the judgment that was made will be sealed.

*Din*, judgment, is not malleable. It is unwavering, absolute, black and white. You acted in certain ways and you will be punished or rewarded. Our liturgy on Rosh Hashanah pictures even the angels trembling in fear during this time. God's *din* strikes fear into our hearts.

I'm guessing that for many people here the image of an all-powerful, judging God doesn't work. So, what do we make of this overarching theme of these Yamim Noraim, these Days of Awe? How do we make sense of a Male God sitting on a high throne and judging us as we tap our chest and recite our litany of wrongs?

Even if we don't love this image, the idea of right and wrong, of consequences, is vital. Too often we have the tendency to explain away our deeds—“what I said wasn't really that hurtful,” “I only did that a few times.” “I didn't really mean it.” God's aspect of *din* calls us to account. We know what we did. In our heart of hearts, we know where we have fallen short. We can't let ourselves off the hook too easily. And so, the confessions of this day ask us to really look inside ourselves, not to judge ourselves too favorably. We are asked to honestly see where we have gone wrong.

Humbling ourselves, however, is not the only work that Yom Kippur calls us to do. Our liturgy and texts highlight another aspect of these days, that of *rachamim*, often translated as mercy or compassion. When we meld together *din* and *rachamim*, judgment and compassion, then we are getting closer to what these holidays are all about.

We'll start our exploration of *rachamim* with the word itself. You might know it best from the prayer we say at funerals, *El Malei Rachamim*. Compassionate God. Like many Hebrew words, *rachamim* can be hard to pin down in English. It can mean compassion, mercy, pity, or even love. It comes from the root *resh, chet, mem* meaning womb. Contemporary rabbis talk about the womb as a place that makes room for something new to grow, a place of respect for life, and of love and comfort where we are connected to another without expecting anything in return.<sup>1</sup>

I want to complicate this picture of peace and tranquility a little bit courtesy of the folks at RadioLab, yet another podcast I encourage you to explore. In a fascinating episode on the placenta, they explain that the womb is not tranquil. There is actually quite a struggle between the pregnant woman and the fetus. They describe it as “a cage match, like a knock-down, drag-out boxing match or a tiny war even.”<sup>2</sup> I think that this description is more apt than the more pastoral, totally nurturing image of *rechem*, because in the real world *rachamim* is not alone. The world is not just a place of compassion and mercy. *Rachamim* is often in conflict with *din*, God's attribute of judgement.

The struggle between these two attributes is illustrated by a passage in the Talmud where we learn that God is busy for twelve hours during the day. Your obvious first question is, what is God doing all that time? I'm glad you asked. For the first three hours God studies Torah (of course!) during the second three hours *ושב ודן את כל העולם כולו* “God sits and judges the entire world.” That should worry you because while judging, God sees so much sin that God finds reason to destroy the world. But then, “God arises from the throne of judgement, *din*, and sits on the throne of mercy, *rachamim*, and the world is not destroyed.”<sup>3</sup> God cannot get through even three hours of judging us without wanting to destroy the entire world. However, the desire to judge is tempered by mercy. God doesn't sit in the place of judgement forever. God literally stands up and moves to the place *rachamim*. With only *din* the world would be destroyed. *Rachamim* is what saves us all.

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Yoel H. Kahn, “Moving to the Throne of Mercy,” September 18, 2020, <https://www.bethelberkeley.org/sites/default/files/HHD-2020-5781-Rabbi-Yoel-Kahn-Rosh-Hashanah-drash.pdf>. Rabbi Steven Lewis, “Judgment and Mercy,” Rosh Hashanah 5773, <https://images.shulcloud.com/13767/uploads/HHD-2012-Sermons/FINALRH1JudgmentandMercyWebsite6.pdf>. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “Remembering the Compassion that Comes from the Womb,” February 25, 2003, <https://rabbisacks.org/remembering-the-compassion-that-comes-from-the-womb/>. Rabbi Esther Adler, “Compassion of Womb-like-ness,” Yom Kippur 5781, <https://mzion.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Compassion.pdf>. Rabbi Adler has an extended discussion of the connections between *rechem* and *rachamim* and discusses the difference between empathy, sympathy and compassion.

<sup>2</sup> “Everybody's Got One,” RadioLab, August 20, 2021, <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/radiolab/articles/everybodys-got-one>. I highly recommend you listen to this entire show and this one (<https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/radiolab/articles/unsilencing>) which builds upon it. They are both fascinating.

<sup>3</sup> In case you were wondering, God spends hours 6-9 sustaining the entire world and hour 9-12 sporting with the Leviathan (or perhaps all animals). After the destruction of the Temple, God no longer sports but instead teaches Torah to schoolchildren during hours 9-12. God spends the 12 hours of the night doing the same thing as during the day, or rides on God's light cherub and flies in eighteen thousand worlds, or listens to the songs of the angels. All of this can be found in Avodah Zarah 3b ([https://www.sefaria.org/Avodah\\_Zarah.3b.7?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Avodah_Zarah.3b.7?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en)).

This image of a self-aware and merciful God might be odd for those who attend Torah study regularly. After all, we see the God of the Torah regularly acting with vengeance. Time and time again, God vows to annihilate the entire Israelite community only to be dissuaded by Moses. But, by the time the rabbis of the Talmud encounter God, God has mellowed somewhat. Tractate Berachot (7a) envisions God praying and then asks, what does God pray for? The answer: “May it be My will that My mercy will overcome My anger (towards Israel), and may My mercy prevail over My other attributes and may I deal with My children with the quality of mercy, and may I stop short of the limit of strict justice.” God prays that God will have mercy on us all. God prays that *din* will be tempered by *rachamim*.

This movement from *din* to *rachamim* has a special place during this time of year. Rambam, the well-known Torah commentator from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, says that on Rosh Hashanah God is concerned most with the attribute of justice and on Yom Kippur with mercy. Thus, Rosh Hashanah is known as יום דין ברחמים the day of judgement tempered with mercy and Yom Kippur as יום רחמים בדין, the day of mercy tempered with judgement. We don’t want all of one or all of the other, but today God embraces the expansiveness and ambiguity that lead to mercy rather than to the either/or thinking of judgment and justice. Imagining a God looking to find the best in us, rather than judge us too harshly puts a new emphasis on this day.

And just as God focuses on *rachamim*, we are invited to move in that direction as well. We are warned in the Mishna (Pirkei Avot 2:4) not to judge another until we have reached their place. The Bartenura, a 15<sup>th</sup> Century commentary on the Mishna says, “If you see your neighbor ensnared by some temptation, do not judge your neighbor harshly until you have faced the same temptation and mastered it.” We are asked to give people the benefit of the doubt. We read in the Talmud וְהִדְדֵן אֶת הַבְּרִי לְכַף זְכוּת, we should judge others with the scale weighted towards the good. If someone comes to us and asks for forgiveness with a full and open heart, we are encouraged to forgive that person. In this way we are begin asked to emulate God and let our *rachamim* overcome our *din*.

Just as we don’t just others too harshly we should not judge ourselves too harshly either. It can be easy to feel inadequate, especially when we compare ourselves others. Look at all the amazing people in this room, and joining us on Zoom. How can we ever stack up? A Chasidic story talks about the sage Reb Zusya who lies on his deathbed, worried. His disciples cannot understand his trepidation; he was a great rabbi and teacher. Zusya explains that he is worried that after he dies God will not ask him why he was not more like Moses or King David. He worries God will ask him why he was not more like Zusya. This story should give us great comfort. We don’t have to be like everyone else, we just have to be ourselves. And, when God looks at our actions over the past year, our deeds are weighed and the good should outweigh the bad. That also feels comforting. 55% good and only 45% bad? I think we have that covered. So, if God doesn’t expect at 90 to 10 split, let alone perfection, we should not expect that from ourselves either.

In thinking about the ideas of *din* and *rachamim*, Rabbi Yoel Kahn ponders the question “What would it take for you to move from a place of *din* to a place of *rachamim*?”<sup>4</sup> God, it appears, just gets up and moves at some point before God destroys the world. It is that easy.

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<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Yoel H. Kahn, Ibid. This question was asked to Rabbi Kahn by Rabbi Rebekah Stern. Rabbi Kahn’s sermon on this topic is excellent. I encourage you to read it.

But for us it might be harder. What would it take for you to move from a place of *din* to a place of *rachamim*?

What does it take to be kinder and more compassionate to our family and friends? To our neighbors? To the driver who just tailgated us, or the person on the store without a mask on, or the “friend” who posted something over the line on Facebook? How do we let go of our *din*? How do we take a step back?

That answer looks different for each of us, but I invite you ponder what the world look like if we all embraced *rachamim* just a little bit more. What if we treated the people in our household with love and respect? What if we helped out a friend before being asked, or said a kind word to a neighbor? What if we took a deep breath, and turned off our televisions, and stopped checking the news, and let that anxious person go in front of us?

A Buddhist story is told about a senior and junior monk travelling together. They reached a river with strong currents and a woman standing nearby asked if they could help her cross. Despite the vow he had taken not to touch a woman, the senior monk picked her up, carried her across the river and gently placed her on the other side. The two monks continued walking in silence. After many hours, the younger monk could not restrain himself. “We are not permitted to touch women; how could you carry her on your shoulders?” The older monk replied, “Brother I set her down on the other side of the river hours ago, why are you still carrying her?” In addition to illustrating, perhaps, the folly in separating yourself from women, this story teaches us two additional lessons this Yom Kippur. First, we have to let some things go. That means leaning into *rachamim* rather than *din*. After all, it is not our job to judge the world. And second, life is messy. Promises we make, intentions we have, don’t always happen exactly as they should. We don’t want God to judge us only with *din*, so we should give ourselves and others the benefit of the doubt. We learn in the Talmud, “One who judges another favorably is himself judged favorably (Shabbat 127b).”<sup>5</sup> If we approach others with a little less judgment, perhaps we will be able to contribute to a world that is a little bit kinder.

This day, Yom Kippur, HaYom, Shabbat Shabbaton, is a day when we are looked at not with the harsh and unfeeling eye of *din*, but with an understanding and compassionate sense of *rachamim*. The very first Yom Kippur was the day that Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the second set of tablets, the second set of Ten Commandments. After the sin of the Golden Calf, God wanted to destroy us all, but God’s *rachamim* overcame God’s *din*. And if the vengeful and wrathful God of our Torah, the God of high standards and little mercy, can find a way to forgive us for the ultimate sin of idolatry, then surely there is hope in the world. Because, today is not about *that* vision of God, but a vision of God who is merciful and compassionate—who wants us to succeed in being and doing better. And that is how we should act towards one another and ourselves. Kindly and compassionately. Giving the benefit of the doubt. Embracing *rachamim*, because that is what our world, our community and we ourselves need most. *Rachamim*.

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<sup>5</sup> Hanan Harchol’s video and texts on the topic of judging others favorably are thought provoking. You can find them here: <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/262960.61?lang=bi>.