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Transforming Sins to Merits

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*And a *siyum* of tractate *Yoma*.

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1.

HOW CAN THE UNDESIRABLE BRING BLESSINGS?

At the end of tractate *Yoma*, the *Gemara* says:¹

The school of Rabbi Yishmael taught: One who experiences a seminal emission on Yom Kippur should be apprehensive the entire year. But if he survives the year, he can be assured that he has a share in the World to Come. Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak said: Know that it is so, as the whole world is hungry, and he is satiated. When Rav Dimi came {from Eretz Yisrael}, he said: He will live a long life, increase, and propagate.

At first glance, it seems that the *Gemara* brings these teachings because they are a thematic continuation of what was said earlier: “One who experiences a seminal emission on Yom Kippur descends {into a *mikvah*} and immerses....”² But we need to clarify: How is it possible that the *Gemara* concludes *Chapter Yom HaKippurim* — which (as its name indicates) discusses matters relating to repentance and atonement; and moreover, the **final mishnah**, as well as the ensuing discussion in the *Gemara*, focuses on repentance — with a message opposite to that of repentance and atonement? This question becomes even more baffling considering that the *Gemara* discusses one of the most severe sins. This sin, when done intentionally, requires great repentance and atonement.³ And from the severity of the sin when done intentionally we can appreciate the severity of the sin when done unintentionally⁴ for they are (somewhat) comparable. We can also appreciate the severity of the sin from the various punishments (when done intentionally) and from the sacrifices, and the like (when done unintentionally).

Although the *Gemara* clarifies that at the end of the day, on the contrary, “he can be assured that he has a share in the World to Come... He will live a long life, increase, and propagate.” This only clarifies how **after time** (after Yom

¹ {*Yoma* 88a.}

² On the top of *Yoma* 88a, the *Gemara* says: “Anyone who is obligated to immerse, immerses {in his usual manner on Yom Kippur}.... one who had a seminal emission may immerse at any point.”

³ See *Zohar*, vol. 1, 62a, p. 119b, et al.; see *Iggeres HaTeshuvah*, ch. 4.

⁴ For this also requires atonement (Rashi on *Shevuos* 2a, s.v., “*toleh*”; see *Iggeres HaKodesh*, end of ch. 28; *Kuntres Acharon*, s.v., “*ulehavin pirtei*.”)

Kippur) something positive comes about as a result of this. But on Yom Kippur itself, this is something that Hashem does not want.

Additionally, we need to clarify this issue itself: How is it possible that from something doubly undesirable — “One who experiences (a) a seminal emission (b) on Yom Kippur” — such a wonderful benefit emerges: “He can be assured that he has a share in the World to Come,” and, “He will live a long life, increase, and propagate”?

Rashi explains:

If he survives the year — if he does not die, then he can be assured that he has good deeds in hand that protects him....

However, this only clarifies that something **else** (his good deeds) protected him from being harmed. But the *Gemara's* wording, “one who experiences a seminal emission” is a sign that “he can be assured...,” implies that there is a connection between the two.⁵ This is difficult to understand: How can this matter {experiencing a seminal emission} bring about the great benefit that “he can be **assured** that he has a share in the World to Come”; moreover, (even in this world) “he will live a long life, increase, and propagate,” having children and grandchildren?⁶

⁵ {I.e., there is a connection between him experiencing a seminal emission and his being assured that he has a share in the World to Come, etc.}

⁶ {Rashi on *Yoma* 88a, s.v. “*sagi umasgi*.”}

2.

HIS SINS ARE COUNTED AS MERITS

A similar, albeit, more difficult question comes up regarding repentance out of love. The *Gemara* writes regarding this,⁷ “His intentional sins are counted for him as merits.” *Maharsha* asks that seemingly this is most surprising, for it turns out that “the sinner benefits”⁸ {from his sin}. *Maharsha* answers:

This person certainly performs complete repentance and performs additional good deeds, more than necessary to compensate for his sin. These extra good deeds become like merits for him. The verse that the *Gemara* quoted proves this point. As the verse says,⁹ “And if a wicked person turns back from his wickedness and acts with justice and righteousness, he shall surely live on account of those acts...”¹⁰ This implies that the acts of justice and righteousness that he adds for the sake of repentance brings about that he shall surely live on account of those acts.”

This answer is difficult to understand: The *Gemara*’s wording — “**his intentional sins are counted** for him as merits” — indicates that the *Gemara* does not refer to another action that is *related* to his sins, i.e., additional **merits** {of his righteous acts, that he performs} as **a result** of the sins. Rather, the *Gemara*’s wording indicates that his sins themselves become merits. Thus, the question stands, as mentioned — how can it be that a sinner benefits {from his sin}?

Although seemingly we can suggest that is in fact what the *Gemara* means by saying, “his intentional sins are counted for him as merits,” since his additional good deeds come about as a result of him changing and transforming himself by repenting for his sins. Thus, his “intentional sins” brought about and are the **cause of** his repentance out of love, as well as his merits.

⁷ *Yoma* 86b.

⁸ {*Challah*, ch. 2, *mishnah* 7.}

⁹ *Yechezkel* 33:19.

¹⁰ This is the wording in *Maharsha*, but in *Yechezkel*, it says, “he shall live.” See *Yechezkel* 33:16, 18:27-28.

We find a similar concept regarding a legal document.¹¹ Although a typical document is presumed to be legitimate, when someone contests its legitimacy, following which its legitimacy is verified in court, this document attains a stronger legal status than a document on which no protest was made. Thus, the **protest** led the document to be **reinforced**.

But this answer does not suffice. The protest only brings an improvement to the **document**. Similarly, in our context, intentional sins ultimately benefit the **person** who repents. However, the wording, “his intentional sins are counted for him as merits,” implies that the **entity** under discussion — the sins themselves — are transformed into merits.

3.

TWO TYPES

We can clarify this based on an explanation upon the conclusion of tractate *Yoma* in the *mishnah*:¹²

Rabbi Akiva said: How fortunate are you, Israel; before Whom are you purified, and Who purifies you? It is your Father in Heaven, as the verse says: “And I will sprinkle purifying water upon you, and you shall be purified.”¹³ And it says: “The *mikvah*¹⁴ of Israel is Hashem.”¹⁵ Just as a *mikvah* purifies the impure, so too, the Holy One purifies Israel.

Rabbi Akiva makes two points: a) “before Whom are you purified,” and b) “Who purifies you?” Consequently, he quotes two supporting verses: a) “And I will sprinkle purifying water upon you,” and b) “The *mikvah* of Israel is Hashem.” The *Rogatchover Gaon*¹⁶ explains: These two matters are indicative of

¹¹ See *Tur* and *Shulchan Aruch*, “*Choshen Mishpat*,” sec. 46.

¹² *Yoma* 85b.

¹³ *Yechezkal* 36:25.

¹⁴ {Ritual bath.}

¹⁵ *Yirmiyahu* 17:13.

¹⁶ {Rabbi Yosef Rosen (1858-1936) of Rogatchev (Belarus).} *Tzafnas Paneach al HaRambam, Hilchos Teshuvah*, ch. 2, par. 2.

the difference between the two types of purification: sprinkling¹⁷ and *mikvah*. In order to purify a person, a sprinkling needs intent to effect purification.¹⁸ A *mikvah*, however, purifies a person even if he has no intent to immerse.¹⁹

On this basis, we can appreciate the difference between the wording of the two verses that Rabbi Akiva quotes: “And I will sprinkle purifying water upon you,” and “the *mikvah* of Israel is Hashem.” Both passages refer to Hashem purifying the Jewish people. However, the first verse says, “And **I will sprinkle** purifying water upon you” — Hashem **sprinkles**; meaning, He performs the sprinkling. In the second verse, however, no **action** (i.e., intent to become pure) is mentioned, since intent is not a requirement for this form of purification.

Thus, from the perspective of the One purifying, i.e., Hashem, we see two methods of purification. The same holds true regarding the *avodah* of repentance and {and the concomitant process of} purification from the vantage point of a person {being purified}. In this regard, the *Gemara*²⁰ explains that there are two general categories of repentance: Repentance motivated by fear (and suffering) and repentance motivated by love. Repentance motivated by love stems from a genuine desire and a sincere resolve to **return** to Hashem and to set things right, and so forth. But when a person repents because of fear (and certainly, because of his suffering) his motive is to avoid punishment. In his bid to avoid punishment, he **consequently** regrets his sin, etc.

The *Gemara* then explains the difference in the effects of these two sorts of repentance: Concerning repentance out of fear, the verse says, “I will rectify their waywardness.”²¹ Rashi²² explains, “like a blemished person who heals, a slight

¹⁷ {This refers to the ashes of the Red Heifer, which were sprinkled on a person who had become impure by coming in contact with a corpse.}

¹⁸ Tractate *Parah*, ch. 12, *mishnah* 2; *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Parah*” ch. 10, par. 7-8.

¹⁹ Only regarding *terumah* {the portion of crops gifted to a *kohen*} and *kodshim* {sacrifices} did the Sages enact the stringency that a person must have intent. (See *Chagigah* 18b, ff.; *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Mikvaos*,” ch. 1, par. 8.)

²⁰ *Yoma* 86a.

²¹ *Hoshea* 14:5.

²² *Yoma* 86a, s.v., “*ukesiv erpeh*.”

scar remains.”²³ But when one's repentance is motivated by love, “the sin is **uprooted retroactively**.”²⁴

This difference also has *halachic* ramifications: When a man betroths a woman on the condition that she has no sins — if she then repented (for the sins that she had committed) because of fear, the betrothal is ineffective, since her sins at the time of the betrothal were **not** uprooted {retroactively}. However, if her repentance was induced by love, she is betrothed, for her sins were **uprooted retroactively**. Thus, at the time of the betrothal, she had no sins. As the *Gemara* differentiates regarding vows and blemishes:²⁵

{A man betrothed a woman on the condition that she has no vows incumbent upon her to fulfill, but she does have such vows.} If she goes to a *halachic* authority who dissolves (her vows), she is then betrothed. {However, if he betroths her on the condition that she has no blemishes, but she does have blemishes:} If she consults with a doctor who heals her blemishes, she is {still} not betrothed.... {This is because when} a *halachic* authority {dissolves a vow, he} uproots the vow **retroactively**, but a doctor only heals going forward.

4.

BAAL TESHUVAH AND TZADDIK

This difference between repentance motivated by love or by fear, in a general sense — a person who repents out of love does so with the intent of repenting, etc., in contrast to a person who repents out of fear — also exists more specifically in the different types of repentance out of love:

As mentioned, repentance out of love uproots the sin “retroactively.” But this is not the highest level of repentance out of love, whereby “his intentional

²³ {Lit., “his designation partially remains.”}

²⁴ *Yoma* 86a, s.v., “*kan me’ahavah*.”

²⁵ *Kesuvos* 74b.

sins are counted for him as merits.” Meaning, his “intentional sins” are not only uprooted; rather, they become “as merits.”

Love has numerous levels, but in general, they are {as referred to in the verse}:²⁶ “with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.” Accordingly, there are also many corresponding levels of repentance that come about as a result of these levels of love.

As discussed, the advantage of repentance based on love is a person’s intent. Thus, the loftiest intent is expressed only in the highest form of repentance out of love. On this basis, we can even say that the intent of a person who repents on a lower level, when “the sin is uprooted retroactively,” is {on a relative scale}, not even considered to be {genuine} resolve.

This is analogous to the declaration of our Rabbis²⁷ that loving Hashem with “all your heart and all your soul” but without “all your might” {falls short. A person who loves Hashem in this limited fashion} is considered as not performing Hashem’s will.

In general, this concept can be understood from the *Rogatchover Gaon’s* wording: “To remove a sin does not require intention; to *fix* a sin, does.”

In a clear *halachah*, we find **some** evidence to support these distinctions within the category of repentance out of love:

The *Gemara*²⁸ states that if a man betroths a woman on the condition that he is a *tzaddik*,²⁹ then even if he was completely wicked, she is deemed betrothed {out of doubt}, since perhaps in the meantime, he had thoughts of repentance. This raises a question: Whichever way we look at it, this seems difficult. If this case refers to someone who repented because of fear, then his condition was clearly not met. For repentance out of fear does not render a person a *tzaddik*,

²⁶ {*Devarim* 6:5.}

²⁷ *Berachos* 35b; see *Maharsha*, *ibid*; *Likkutei Torah*, “*parshas Shelach*,” 42c.

²⁸ *Kiddushin* 49b.

²⁹ {A righteous person, free of sin.}

since “a slight scar remains.”³⁰ And if this case refers to a person whose repentance was motivated by love, the woman should still not be betrothed since {such} a *baal teshuvah*³¹ stands on higher ground than a *tzaddik*. As our Rabbis say,³² “In a place where *baalei teshuvah* stand, {even} full-fledged *tzaddikim* cannot stand.” The law is that even if “he misled her to her benefit” [in regards to familial standing — if he claimed his familial status was inferior to its actual status; or regarding finances— if he betrothed her on condition that he was poor but in truth he was wealthy] she is not betrothed.³³

The answer: “Perhaps {in the meantime} he had thoughts of repentance (**out of love**) in his mind.” But he only had in mind to perform the type of repentance that uproots his sins retroactively. He did not have in mind to repent in a manner whereby his sins are transformed into merits. Specifically, regarding this higher form of repentance did our Rabbis declare, “In a place where *baalei teshuvah* stand, {even} full-fledged *tzaddikim* cannot stand.”

We can say further: When considering the likelihood that a person, in an **instant**, “had **thoughts** of repentance,” it is impossible for him to have had total resolve. Therefore, such repentance cannot transform his sins to merits and lift him to a higher rank than a *tzaddik*.

The explanation:³⁴ The advantage of a *baal teshuvah* over a consummate *tzaddik* (who never succumbed to sin) is not only quantitative. Meaning, that besides a *baal teshuva*’s own merits, he also possesses the merits that accrue as a result of his previous intentional sins. But moreover (and more importantly) a *baal teshuvah* possesses a qualitative advantage over a *tzaddik*. “His intentional sins are counted for him as merits,” but merits of an entirely different quality {than ordinary merits}. Therefore, “In a place where *baalei teshuvah* stand, {even} full-fledged *tzaddikim* **cannot** stand.” No matter how many merits the *tzaddik* amasses from his lofty *avodah*, he cannot attain this “new” *avodah* — a whole different quality of merits. But this attainment can only be reached when

³⁰ {His former designation as someone wicked is not completely erased.}

³¹ {Penitents.}

³² *Berachos* 34b; *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Teshuvah*,” ch. 7, par. 4.

³³ *Kiddushin* 48b (*mishnah*), 49a.

³⁴ See *Derech Mitzvosecha*, 191a ff.

repentance springs from a person's consummate love, as discussed, and by extension, his consummate resolve (as will be explained), which rectifies sins and transforms the intentional sins themselves into merits.

5.

PREPARATION

In *Tanya*,³⁵ the Alter Rebbe explains what this consummate love and intent looks like, as well as how sins are thereby transformed into merits:

Forbidden foods... are forever tied and bound by the “extraneous forces” (the *kelipos*).³⁶ They are not elevated from the *kelipos*... until the sinner repents so earnestly that his intentional sins become transformed into veritable merits. This is achieved by “repentance out of love,” springing from the depths of the heart, with great love and fervor, and from a soul passionately desiring to cleave to Hashem, and thirsting for Hashem, like a parched and barren soil thirsts desperately for water. For until now, his soul had been found in a barren wilderness and in the shadow of death, which is the *sitra achra*.³⁷ In the greatest possible measure, his soul had been far removed from the light of the Divine Countenance. Therefore {now that he “repents out of love”}, his soul thirsts for Hashem even more intensely than the souls of the *tzaddikim* {who have never sinned}. As our Sages say: “In a place where *baalei teshuvah* stand...” Only concerning repentance out of such great love has it been said that “his intentional sins are counted for him as merits,” since through these sins, he has attained this great love, {by having repented}.

Here, the Alter Rebbe addresses both points {referred to in Section 2}: (a) The advantage that a **person** attains: his deliberate sins elicit that “**his soul** thirsts for Hashem even more fervently than the souls of the *tzaddikim* who have never sinned”; and (b) the change in the **object** — his sins — “since through them, he attained this great love {when he repented}.”

The explanation for this matter according to the approach of *halachah*:

³⁵ Chapter 7.

³⁶ {*Kelipah* — Lit., “a shell” or “a peel.” The term refers to anything that conceals, and so opposes G-dliness, just as a shell or a peel conceals the fruit within. *Kelipah* is often used to refer to evil or impurity.}

³⁷ {Lit., “the other side”; a euphemism for the *kelipos*.}

We find many laws and levels regarding the importance of preparatory and precursory steps and their relationship with their intended end.

For example, preparatory steps that facilitate a *mitzvah* — without them, we cannot perform the *mitzvah*; therefore, these steps themselves attain a degree of importance. According to Rabbi Eliezer, “**One may cut down trees** {on *Shabbos*} to prepare charcoal in order to fashion iron tools {for circumcision}.”³⁸ Meaning, in order to fashion a knife used for circumcision on *Shabbos*, in his opinion, (most) actions that facilitate the *mitzvah* override *Shabbos*.³⁹

Even more far-reaching, regarding preparing and facilitating the *mitzvos* of *sukkah* and *lulav*, according to the *Jerusalem Talmud*:⁴⁰ “One who **makes** a *sukkah* for himself recites the blessing, ‘Blessed... Who sanctified us with His *mitzvos* and **commanded us to make**⁴¹ a *sukkah*...’ One who fashions a *lulav* for himself recites a blessing, ‘Blessed... Who sanctified us with His *mitzvos* and **commanded us to make** a *lulav*...” And the same applies to *mezuzah*, *tefillin*, *tzitzis*, etc.

At face value, the explanation is the following: Since the Torah instructed us to perform a specific *mitzvah*, and this *mitzvah* can be performed only through specific actions and preparatory steps, we must conclude that these actions and steps are part of the *mitzvah*. (Alternatively, these steps attain a degree of prominence akin to that of the *mitzvah* [and according to the *Jerusalem Talmud*, in the case of the *sukkah*, etc., these steps also become *mitzvos*].)

We find a higher level of steps that are preparatory for a *mitzvah* in the context of the service in the *Beis Hamikdash*, and specifically, regarding bringing the blood of a sacrifice to the Altar. Blood was brought to the Altar only

³⁸ *Shabbos* 130a.

³⁹ *Shabbos* 131a.

⁴⁰ *Berachos*, ch. 9, *halachah* 3.

⁴¹ I.e., according to the *Jerusalem Talmud*, actions that facilitate a *mitzvah*, become *mitzvos* themselves, not just preparatory steps which attain some level of importance, e.g., they override *Shabbos*.

in order to perform the service of sprinkling the blood on the Altar. Nevertheless, the law is that the action of bringing the blood itself attains the prominence and *halachic* status of a service in the *Beis Hamikdash* to the extent that “improper thoughts invalidate” it.⁴²

More generally, there are certain Temple services that were considered somewhat preparatory, “an incomplete service.”⁴³ Meaning, the laws and *halachic* status of a service apply to it, but it is not a service that completes the procedure (for another service follows it). Thus, a non-*kohen* would not be liable to incur the death penalty if he performed this sort of Temple service.

In a **similar** fashion, we can apply this concept to our case: Since a person can only reach the highest level of repentance out of love (as cited earlier from *Tanya*) through his previous sins (and his previous sins afterward also elevate his *mitzvos* [merits] to a higher plane) therefore, the sins themselves are elevated and attain the status of merits — similar to the preparatory steps for a *mitzvah*.

6.

MAYBE NOT

However, seemingly, this answer does not suffice:

a) The preparatory steps for a *mitzvah*, after all, are not transformed, and do not become *mitzvos*. Even according to Rabbi Eliezer, they remain **preparatory steps**.

Even according to the *Jerusalem Talmud*, which maintains that upon making a *sukkah* or a *lulav*, we must recite the blessing “who... **commanded** us...,” nonetheless, making a *sukkah* does not fulfill the *mitzvah* that “you shall

⁴² *Zevachim* 13a, in the *mishnah*; *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Pesachim*,” ch. 13, par. 4.

⁴³ *Yoma* 24a ff.; Rashi, loc. cit.

dwell in *sukkos*”;⁴⁴ rather, this action is the *mitzvah* of **making** a *sukkah*. Similarly, bringing the blood to the Altar is not a complete service.

b) Of primary importance: In all of the above circumstances, the act is a preparation for the *mitzvah*, meaning it is the same “type” of action as the *mitzvah*. In all cases, the action is closely connected to **that** corresponding *mitzvah* itself: he makes a ***sukkah*** or a ***lulav***, etc., or he **brings the blood to the Altar**. In contrast, in our context, he acted in a way that is the **antithesis** of merit, yet we still say that the sins themselves become merits.

This question becomes even stronger: We find that certain discretionary, preparatory steps, do not attain the status of a *mitzvah*, nor even the status of preparatory steps. For example, this is the case with plowing and harvesting, etc., and all the steps entailed by the process {described in the verse}, “You may gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil.”⁴⁵ This is true even though without these activities, it is impossible to fulfill certain *mitzvos* connected with them, such as the separation of *terumah*⁴⁶ and *maaser*,⁴⁷ and so forth. We can posit that the reason {these activities don’t attain *mitzvah* or preparatory status} is that according to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, these activities are undesirable: “Is it possible that a person plows... and sows... what will become of Torah?”⁴⁸ And by the same token, according to the Rabbis {who dispute Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai}, these actions, at the very least, are undesirable (in contrast to preparatory steps for a *mitzvah*, or the like). {In that case, how can sins, which are not just undesirable, but forbidden, be deemed to be preparatory steps?}

⁴⁴ {*Vayikra* 23:42.}

⁴⁵ {*Devarim* 11:14.}

⁴⁶ {A Torah commandment to give a portion of the harvest a *kohen*.}

⁴⁷ {Three Torah commandments obligating a person to give a tenth of his remaining harvest (after *terumah* has been separated) to a *levi*, following which a tenth of the remainder is either eaten by the owner in Yerushalayim, or given to the poor.}

⁴⁸ *Berachos* 35b.

THE ANSWER

The explanation in brief:

Every *mitzvah* contains a general element — an element in which all *mitzvos* are equal — as our Sages say, “He fulfills the will of Hashem”;⁴⁹ “I said {what I wanted} and My will was performed.”⁵⁰ (The converse is true of every sin: “He transgresses the will of Hashem.”) In addition, each *mitzvah* also has its specific elements: Circumcising the foreskin, sitting in a *sukkah*, etc.

Regarding the specific elements: Although the preparation for a *mitzvah* is performed **with** the item {used for the *mitzvah*} or with something **related** to this item, nonetheless, these actions are not **part**, or a **detail**, of the *mitzvah* itself. Manufacturing a knife for circumcision plays no **part** in the actual cutting of the foreskin. **Making** a *sukkah* and *lulav* is not part of the *mitzvah* of sitting in a *sukkah*; **bringing** the blood is not part of the *mitzvah* of sprinkling the blood.

Rambam explains the point of repentance, in general, as follows:⁵¹

What constitutes repentance? A sinner should abandon his transgression and remove it from his thoughts, resolving in his *heart* never to commit it again, as the verse says, “Let the wicked one forsake his way....”⁵²

Meaning, repentance is of the same class, moreover, is in the same “place” as the overarching element of all *mitzvos* (and sins) — a deliberate decision, and a “resolve in his *heart*.” Since repentance out of love, with its passionate thirst, is called forth by sins, therefore, the sins themselves become merits.

However, this only occurs when a person has consummate love and intent, as discussed. For then the sins become a part of his *avodah* of repentance (as a

⁴⁹ *Berachos* 35b.

⁵⁰ *Rashi* on *Shemos*, 29:18.

⁵¹ *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Teshuvah*,” ch. 2, par. 2.

⁵² {*Yeshayahu* 55:7.}

result of his love and intent), and thus, they become merits. However, when these two factors are not exemplary, although he repents out of love, his intentional sins are not transformed into merits; he only uproots them **retroactively**.

8.

SOME EXAMPLE

Briefly, some possible examples, **similar** at least, to the aforementioned concept:

Certain preparatory actions are substantially similar to the *mitzvah* for which they prepare, and they also become a *mitzvah*:

The category of *chinuch*:⁵³ The sacrifices and services of the days of inauguration {of the *Mishkan*}⁵⁴ (*chinuch*);⁵⁵ the *minchas chinuch* of a *kohen*;⁵⁶ a father's biblical⁵⁷ obligation to provide Torah *chinuch* to his child; and others.

Another example: *Mitzvah* observance in the times of exile, according to *Sifri* on the verse,⁵⁸ “*You will be banished... place these words of Mine... — Although I am exiling you... be distinguished through {performance of the} commandments {so that} when you return, they will not be new to you.*”⁵⁹ And other examples.

An example of quasi-sins being transformed into merits within the category of ***mitzvos themselves***: The Scapegoat,⁶⁰ the Red Heifer⁶¹ (and the

⁵³ {Lit., education, this term also denotes inauguration. Each of these examples are preparatory.}

⁵⁴ {The portable temple built by Moshe in the desert after the Exodus.}

⁵⁵ Rashi on *Shemos* 28:41 {“...is an expression of initiation. When a person begins something such as a position that he will be in possession of from that day on....} *Vayikra* 7:37.

⁵⁶ {Each *kohen* had to offer a flour offering upon beginning to serve in the Temple.}

⁵⁷ Alter Rebbe's *Hilchos Talmud Torah*, ch. 1 sec. 1, and the sources cited there.

⁵⁸ *Sifri* on *Devarim* 11:17; referenced in Rashi's commentary on *Devarim* 11:17.

⁵⁹ {*Sifri* maintains that *mitzvah* observance during times of exile are (just) preparatory for *mitzvah* observance after the Redemption.}

⁶⁰ {“*Se'ir hamishtaleiach*,” in the Hebrew original; it offered atonement by being cast off a cliff on Yom Kippur.}

⁶¹ {“*Parah adumah*,” in the Hebrew original; it was used for purification from corpse-impurity.}

Decapitated Calf).⁶² In all of these cases, a service that was performed **far outside** {the Temple precincts} specifically effected atonement (“the Torah calls it {the Red Heifer} a sin-offering”).⁶³ This was different from all other sacrifices whose services were performed **inside** (the Temple). And there are other examples.

Similarly: The bull that *Eliyahu HaNavi* offered on Mount Carmel⁶⁴ (by a temporary Divine dispensation);⁶⁵ and other examples.

Moreover, our Rabbis say: “From the forest itself comes {the handle for} the ax {which fells the tree}.”⁶⁶

The fundamental principle of Torah: The saving of a life takes priority, overriding even any biblical prohibition,⁶⁷ except those prohibitions that are the very antithesis of life — the three sins regarding which a person should rather be killed than transgress.⁶⁸ (Normally, someone who commits suicide has no portion in the World to Come).⁶⁹ And there are other examples.

This subject warrants further elaboration, but it is beyond our present scope.

⁶² {“*Eglah arufah*,” in the Hebrew original; it was decapitated as penitence for an unsolved murder.}

⁶³ *Avodah Zarah* 23b.

⁶⁴ {While it was prohibited to offer sacrifices outside of the *Beis Hamikdash*.}

⁶⁵ {“*Horaas shaah*,” in the Hebrew original.}

⁶⁶ *Sanhedrin* 39b; see *Tanya*, “*Likkutei Amarim*,” beg. of ch. 31; see also *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos De’os*,” ch. 2, par. 2.

⁶⁷ *Sanhedrin* 74a.

⁶⁸ {Idolatry, sexual immorality, and murder (*Sanhedrin* 74a).}

⁶⁹ *Maharit, Kesuvos* 103b.

9.

SHOULD CONCERN MEAN REPENTANCE

On this basis, we can also appreciate the conclusion of tractate *Yoma*:

One who experiences a seminal emission on Yom Kippur should be apprehensive the entire year {that perhaps he was given a sign that he and his fast were rejected}. But if he survives the year, he can be assured that he has a share in the World to Come....

First let us explain the nuanced wording, “{he} should be **apprehensive** the entire year.” This is in contrast to the regular wording, “it is a bad omen for him.”

The explanation:

The meaning of the expression, “{he} should be apprehensive the entire year” is that he should repent. For he should be concerned (not [so much] out of fear that he will not live out the year, but because he saw a seminal emission) as Rashi says:⁷⁰ “Perhaps they {the Heavenly court} did not accept his fast, and they have satiated him with that which they can satiate him, like a servant who comes to prepare a cup for his master but the master spills the contents of the ladle onto the servant’s face.” (And as the Alter Rebbe adds)⁷¹ “Meaning, I do not want your service.” This “concern” and reflection brings the person to a higher plane of *avodah* (service) than what he had reached beforehand.

In slightly different words: Since he experienced a seminal emission on *Yom Kippur* unintentionally⁷² — *Yom Kippur* is a time when we afflict ourselves with the five afflictions⁷³ and do not think about sin — this emission was not brought on by his evil inclination, but rather it occurred by Divine providence. Since “from the mouth of the Most High, evil... does not emerge,”⁷⁴ we must

⁷⁰ *Yoma* 88a, s.v., “*yidag*.”

⁷¹ Alter Rebbe’s *Shulchan Aruch*, “*Orach Chaim*,” sec. 615, par. 2.

⁷² Rashi on *Yoma* 88a, s.v., “*haro’eh*.”

⁷³ {We abstain from eating & drinking, washing oneself, anointing oneself, wearing leather shoes, and marital relations (*Yoma* 73b).}

⁷⁴ *Eichah* 3:38.

conclude that the purpose behind this incident was to allow the person to ascend to a higher level of *avodah* through this experience. He can now reach an *avodah* of repentance to which the regular *avodah* of a *tzaddik* would never have brought him (similar to the quote from *Tanya* above).

When he performs the *avodah* of repentance in a complete sense — “he should be apprehensive the entire year” — he receives a **boost** not only in his spiritual *avodah* but also physically: “He will live a long life.” He will live a longer life than was preordained based on the root of his soul and the regular course of his *avodah*.

10.

THE CONTEXT

On this basis, we can also appreciate why chapter *Yom Hakippurim* in tractate *Yoma* concludes with this teaching about a person who experiences a seminal emission on *Yom Kippur*, and its relevance to the continuity of the *mishnah* and the preceding discussion:

In the *mishnah*, Rabbi Akiva discusses two types of purification that come from Hashem: Sprinkling and immersion. Sprinkling requires intent, immersion does not. The *Gemara* then continues to discuss this topic and explains the difference between the two types of repentance — repentance out of love and repentance out of fear. In contrast to repentance out of love, repentance out of fear lacks (perfect) intent.

More specifically, there are two sub-classes of repentance out of love: Repentance that uproots a person’s sins retroactively, making him a *tzaddik*. To achieve this sort of repentance, a fleeting thought, in a single moment, without (perfect) intent. This is similar to immersion in a *mikvah*. Then there is a higher type of repentance that transforms sins into merits. This repentance can be reached only when accompanied with perfect intent, similar to sprinkling, as elucidated above.

The *Gemara* then concludes the topic of repentance with two ideas: a) “He can be assured that he has a share in the World to Come.” Meaning, he receives nothing new, but rather, “he has good deeds in hand.” This is similar to the concept of his sins being retroactively uprooted, as Rashi writes, “now we know that he is a perfect *tzaddik*.”⁷⁵ Although in this scenario, he was also “apprehensive the entire year,” and he did repent with intent, it was not perfect intent. b) “**He will live a long life**, increase, and propagate.” This (his seminal emission on *Yom Kippur*) is not only not a deficit or punishment, G-d forbid, but on the contrary! He attains an advantage and is given something additional — “He will live a long life” — similar to the idea that “his intentional sins are counted for him as merits.” This is achieved with perfect intent.

The new insight conveyed in the conclusion of this tractate over and above the previous discussion (regarding these two levels of repentance out of love):

(a) The concept is communicated more explicitly and comprehensibly in terms of **how** this is accomplished (viz., how sins can be retroactively uprooted, and how deliberate sins can be transformed into merits). Because:

(i) in the case of someone experiencing a seminal emission on ***Yom Kippur*** (**accidentally**), the Talmudic passage emphasizes that the incident was orchestrated by Divine providence;

(ii) by the person being “apprehensive the entire year” — that is, by his perfect intent (and repentance) motivated by his experiencing an emission, his sins become merits.

(b) The benefit that his repentance brings is also expressed by the physical recompense received — he will live a long life; moreover, he receives the perfect reward: children and grandchildren who involve themselves in Torah and *mitzvos*.

— Based on talks delivered on the 6th of Tishrei, Shabbos *parshas Ha’azinu*, and Simchas Torah day, 5736 (1975)

⁷⁵ *Yoma*, *ibid*, s.v., “*teida*.”