On the Day of Atonement, let us cry for the suffering of all

A couple of years ago I was standing in the lobby of a Jewish Community Center in California, admiring the artwork of Shlomo Katz. The JCC had just opened an unusual display of hand-knotted Persian rugs featuring Jewish and biblical themes, and I found myself entirely lost in the rug depicting four panels from the Song of Songs.

The characters woven so lovingly into the rug seemed almost familiar to me, as if they were people I knew. In one of the four rectangular panels, a woman was holding her baby out of harm’s way in a rainstorm while a man was covering them both with what appeared to be an umbrella. Yet if one looked closely enough, one could see two distinct drops falling from the baby’s blanket and blending with the rain. I pondered what those drops meant, and lost myself in thought for quite some time.

“What holiday is it?” I heard.

I looked and saw an elderly lady standing next to me; I had no idea how long either one of us had been standing there.

“I’m sorry?” I responded. “What kind of holiday is it?” she repeated. “Yom Kippur,” I said. I realized that she was not Jewish.

“What is that?” she asked.

“Well,” I said, “We spend the day in synagogue — fasting, praying, thinking of the things we did wrong over the past year, and saying we are sorry.”

As some of you are on your way to the synagogue this Yom Kippur, take a moment to reflect upon the people you harshly judged this year. Break that cycle, crash that wall. Think of your own lost battle and theirs, and open your hearts to the collective “We” that holds everyone inside it.

Jews also pray for humanity, especially on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. However, if we can’t even feel genuine empathy for the members of our own shul’s community, how can we feel such for the rest of humanity?

On this Yom Kippur, let us cry for the lost battles of those we’ve never met, for the suffering we all go through at times. As we ask at the conclusion of the blessing of the Shemoneh Esrei prayer that G-d will bless us all as one, let us unite and become one identity on Yom Kippur, take a moment to reflect upon the people we know when the next warm meal will be served. Have an easy fast and may you be inscribed for a good year.

The holy Ari, Rabbi Yitzchak Luria ben Shlomo Ashkenazi from the 16th century, asked that we go through the Shemoneh Esrei prayer (also known as the “Amidah”), not just as a rote prayer, but as an actual journey. In this prayer, all sins are confessed in the plural (“We have done this; we have done that”), emphasizing communal responsibility for sins.

The vast majority of the sins enumerated during the Yom Kippur service usually involve mistreatment of other people — mostly by speech (offensive speech, scoffing, slander, and swearing falsely, to name a few). These all come into the category of the sin known as “lashon ha-ra” (literally, the evil tongue), which is considered a very serious sin.

Jewish tradition tells us that there is one collective Jewish soul, and the spiritual reality is such that we are all one spiritual body.

On this Yom Kippur, let us cry for the suffering of all people — Jews in Alaska and Jews in New York, Jews in the synagogue of which we are members, or of the synagogue to which we used to belong, Jews who possess all the wealth in the world, and Jews who do not know when the next warm meal will be served.

Happ’s the most important prayer is the confession of the sins of the community, which is inserted into the Shemoneh Esrei prayer (also known as the “Amidah”). Note that in that prayer, all sins are confessed in the plural (“We have done this; we have done that”), emphasizing communal responsibility for sins.

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