

Kaparah Part 1 — DEFINITIONS — SELICHA — MECHILA — KAPARAH

While *kaparah* is a concept we are all familiar with, how much do we really understand it? What does it mean? How does it work? How effective can it be? And what role does it play within the much larger topic of *yissurim* — difficulties and challenges in life?

Rashi¹ says:

It appears in my eyes that whenever the word *kaparah* is used with transgressions... it is always a term of *kinuach* (wiping away) and *ha'avarah* (removing).

Rashi² additionally explains that [*kaparah*] is a term of *ritzuy* (reconciliation) and *piyus* (conciliation, appeasement, rapprochement).

The *Malbim*³ writes:

Kaparah refers to the *kofer* (ransom or fine) and the *mechir* (price) which is taken for the *chet* (transgression), or the *nikayon* and *kinuach* (cleansing and wiping away). This is connected with the *kofer* [payment] which is given [for some transgressions], or the *korban* (offering).

Rav Hirsch⁴ adds:

Selichah is a **personal forgiveness** — that the *aveirah* (transgression) should not permanently damage the relationship between the transgressor and the one he transgressed against.

Mechilah is **forgiveness for the issue** — relinquishing the appropriate penalty for the transgressor. We cannot anticipate either of them unless we first do *teshuva* following our rectification of the damage, as much as possible, and we accept to be faithful with our obligations for the future. Therefore, our request for *selichah* [in our daily prayers] is only after our request for Hashem to help us to do *teshuva*.

The *Aruch HaShulchan*⁵ defines three types of transgressions — *chet*, *avon*, and *pesha*:

A *chet* is more lenient than an *avon*, since a *chet* is done *b'shogeig* (with negligence), while an *avon* is done *meizid* (willfully). And an *avon* is more lenient than a *pesha*, since a *pesha* is a rebellion [against Hashem]. But *kaparah* is greater than all of them... [*Kaparah*] is a *kinuach v'hadachah* (wiping away and cleansing)... Therefore, the day [of repair and rectification] is called Yom Kippur.

The *Siddur Shomeyah Tefillah* adds that both *selichah* and *mechilah* are expressions of forgiveness, but Ibn Ezra proves that the forgiveness of *selicha* is only partial. After the *aveirah* of the *meraglim* (spies), *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* said to Moshe Rabbeinu⁶ “*Salachti kidvarecha* — I have forgiven, as you said.” However, Hashem still punished the Jews for this *chet*, declaring “they will not see the land.”⁷ Thus, *selicha* must be [only] a mitigation of punishment, not a complete forgiveness. And, in fact, being prevented from entering *erezt Yisrael* was a lesser punishment than the one Hashem had originally intended. “*Machal*,” on the other hand, is explained in many statements of *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory)

¹ *Bereshit* 32:21

² *Devarim* 32:43

³ *Vayikra* 5

⁴ Commentary on *Tefillah* – Prayer

⁵ 607:6

⁶ *Bamidbar* 14:20

⁷ *Bamidbar* 14:23

as complete and immediate forgiveness, following from the meaning of its root “*macheh* — wipe out.”

When requesting forgiveness from Hashem we first ask for *selichah*, a temporary reprieve. Then we ask for the greater form of forgiveness, *mechilah*, which is complete and immediate. In the continuation of the *berachah* (blessing), though, we invert the order. There we recount the praises of Hashem, rather than make requests. Accordingly, we mention the greater praise, Hashem granting *mechilah*, before the lesser one of His granting *selichah*.⁸

The *sefer Sh'mah Tefilasi* asks why we only ask for *selicha* and *mechila* in our daily *tefillah* (prayer), and not also *kaparah*. The answer he quotes from his Rebbe is that there is no complete *kaparah* except on Yom Kippur, or with a *korban*.

Rav Shimshon Pinkus⁹ addresses this as well —

There are three [different] concepts — *slichah*, *mechilah*, and *kaparah*. *Selicha* seems to be that one is not demanding the payment of a debt, but the debt is still fully existent and not forgiven. In other words, *selichah* means that [the transgressor] will not suffer any negative consequences, but the debt exists, and will eventually need to be eliminated.

The concept of *mechilah*, however, is that the debt itself is forgiven, but there is still no *kaparah*. For example, one damages another and is, therefore, obligated to pay [for the damage]. If the damaged person merely gives him *selicha*, it means that he won't demand the repayment, although the debt will still exist. But if the person also gives him *mechilah*, then there is no longer any debt. But at the same time, there is no *shalom* (peace) between them, since the damage is still existent and has not been rectified at all. *Kaparah*, however, is a language of wiping away [i.e., in terms of the damage, not only the payment for that damage], as the commentaries explain in *Zevachim* 25a, and it repairs the actual damage.

From this we can differentiate the different stages of *kaparah*. *Teshuva* accomplishes that Hashem gives us [*selichah* and] *mechilah*, but not more. There is no aspect of *kaparah* with this at all. And, similarly, in our *tefillah* (prayers) every day, we don't ask for *kaparah* at all, but rather “*slach lanu, machal lanu,*” since the *tefillah* and *teshuva* can [only] bring us to *selichah* and *mechilah*. But for *kaparah* we need something to facilitate it, like a *korban* (offering in the Temple), lashes, *yissurim*, or Yom Kippur, which do have the ability to give *kaparah*.

Rav Soloveitchik¹⁰ explains —

Yom Kippur has a double function. The first is *kaparah* — acquittal from *chet* — “For the quality of this very day shall acquit you of *chet*”¹¹. This was expressed in the prayer recited by the *Kohen Gadol* in the *Beit HaMikdash* — “Please grant acquittal (a *kaparah*) for *aveirot*.”

The second aspect of Yom Kippur is *taharah* — purification. As it is written — “For the essence of this very day shall acquit you of *chet*, to cleanse you...” This, too, was brought out in the Yom Kippur Temple service. The High Priest pronounced to the assembled people — “Before G-d, you should be cleansed.”

Chet and its negative consequences are born together. No *chet* goes without its retribution, whether it be meted out by a terrestrial or a celestial court. The belief in positive and negative consequences is fundamental to Jewish belief.

Kaparah means forgiveness or withdrawal of claim. This is a legal concept, borrowed from the laws of property. Just as one may release his fellow man of a debt owed to him, so may G-d absolve one of a penalty to which he is liable due to *chet*. *Kaparah*

⁸ *Bi'ur Shemot Hanirdafim*

⁹ *Sichot Rav Shimshon Pinkus – B'inyan Chilukei Kaparah*

¹⁰ *On Repentance – Pinchas H. Peli – Acquittal and Purification*

¹¹ *Vayikra* 16:30

removes the need for the penalty... All this concerns the liability incurred by the transgressor. The moment acquittal (*kaparah*) is granted and penalty wiped from the books, man's liability is terminated.

However, *chet* also has a polluting quality. The Jewish view recognizes a state of *tumat hachet* (spiritual impurity of the transgression). The entire *Tanach* abounds in references to this idea of self-pollution, contamination, rolling about in the mire of *chet*. This impurity makes its mark on the personality of the transgressor... *Chet*, as it were, removes the divine halo from man's head, impairing his spiritual integrity. As a result of *chet*, man is not the same person he was before. [As an example,] every man is presumed acceptable as a credible witness. Natural truthfulness is, to my way of thinking, an integral part of man's character. The moment a person transgresses he lessens his own worth, brings himself down and becomes spiritually defective, thus foregoing his former status. *Chet* deprives man of his natural privileges and unique human attributes. He is subjected to a complete transformation as his original personality departs, and another one replaces it. This is not a form of punishment, or a fine, and is not imposed in a spirit of anger, wrath or vindictiveness. It is a "metaphysical" corruption of the human personality, of the divine image of man. Indeed, true *teshuvah* not only achieves *kaparah* (acquittal and erasure of penalty), it should also bring about *taharah* (purification) from *tum'ah* (spiritual pollution), liberating man from his hard-hearted ignorance and insensitivity. Such *teshuvah* restores man's spiritual viability and rehabilitates him to his original state. And sometimes it [even] makes man rise to heights he never dreamed he could reach.

Rav Soloveitchik concludes —

We make two requests in the prayers of Yom Kippur — "Pardon us our *aveirot* on this Day of *Kaparah*," and also — "Erase and pass out of your sight our *aveirot* and iniquities." The first of these requests corresponds to the *teshuva* of acquittal (*kaparah*), and the other to the *teshuva* of purification.

Rav Chaim Eisen¹², makes a fascinating observation about *kaparah* —

The first four places we find the root "*kapar*" (*chaf-pey-reish*) in the Torah seem to have nothing at all to do with the conventional understanding of *kaparah* as it relates to *aveirot*:

"Make an ark of gofer wood; you should make rooms in the ark, and pitch (*kofer*) it from within and on the outside with pitch (*kofer*)."¹³

"He (Yaakov) said — I will cover up [Aisav's] wrath (*achaprah panav*) with the gift."¹⁴

Ibn Ezra explains this as *achaseh v'astir* — I will cover and hide.

The Radak says similarly — "*achaprah panav*" — *asir ka'aso* (removal of the cover) since the term *kapara* refers to removing.

"And when the layer of dew had gone up, behold, upon the surface of the desert, a thin flaky substance, thin like the frost (*kak'for*), was on the ground."¹⁵

"And you should make a covering (*kapores*) of pure gold."¹⁶

Ibn Ezra explains *kaparah* in this verse as — like a type of a cover... This is similar to *l'chapeir alav* — as a cover for the *chet*.

The Malbim¹⁷ writes —

¹² A teacher in Jerusalem

¹³ *Bereshit* 6:14

¹⁴ *Bereshit* 32:21

¹⁵ *Shemot* 16:14

¹⁶ *Shemot* 25:17

¹⁷ *Vayikra* 5

Some say the concept of *kaparah* is related to *neki'ut* (cleanliness) and *kisuy* (covering), like *kaporet* which is a covering, since it covers the *chet* from being seen, even though it is not completely removed.

Rav Soloveitchik¹⁸ says similarly —

[*Kaparah*] sets up a barrier through which the negative consequences may not pass. By means of *teshuvah* and *kaparah* (acquittal), man puts a protective covering between himself and the penalty for his *chet*.

Rav Shimshon Rafael Hirsch also speaks about the pitch that Hashem told Noach to use to cover the ark, which the verse calls “*kofer*.” He writes¹⁹ —

The basic meaning of the root *kafar* is a protecting or restricting covering. Protective, so that nothing from outside affects it, as here [with the ark], and so also²⁰ *kapores* (the cover of the *aron*); restrictive, that what is covered is kept in and does not affect what is outside...

In reference to *chet*, it occurs with both meanings — to protect the person, the nation, and the Sanctuary, from the effects of *aveirot* committed, and also to keep back, to prevent the *chet* from having its effects.

When a later verse²¹ says — “The *Kohen* should be *m'chapeir* for him for his *chet*, and he should be forgiven,” the literal meaning is that — “The *Kohen* should cover over his *chet* for him, and it will then be forgiven to him”...

Based on the *kaparah* which the priest accomplishes through the blood being placed on the corners of the altar, his future is not endangered by his past...and an unhindered progress in life is granted to him.

Rav Hirsch²² explains —

Kaparah protects the transgressor from the consequences of the *chet*, stemming the consequences which otherwise would ensue from the *aveirah* on the internal and external well-being of the transgressor. It is a... fate we so deservedly should get, if not for G-d's miraculous kindness granting *kapara* to our past. Without *kapara*, which we only have due to G-d's kindness, we would not even be able to exist...

Kapara, that highest act of kindness of the miraculous almighty power of G-d, is the undoing of what was done, the removal of the natural course of cause and effect. It completely undoes all the pernicious mental and physical effects of a negative past on the future life of the transgressor.

Rav Hirsch continues²³ —

The essential meaning of *kapara*, as has already been explained²⁴, is a “covering over” a “burying” of the past. It is the highest act of the absolute, free willed almighty power of G-d. He alone can do away with the natural law of cause and effect, which after all, He Himself has instituted. The consequences of the errors and *aveirot* of the past will have no disturbing effect on the internal and external life of the future. Even after a morally bad past, the blossoming out of a pure and happy future is still possible.

¹⁸ On Repentance – Pinchas H. Peli – Acquittal and Purification

¹⁹ *Bereshit* 6:14

²⁰ *Shemot* 25:17

²¹ *Vayikra* 4:26

²² *Vayikra* 23:27

²³ *Vayikra* 16:6

²⁴ *Bereshit* 6:14

Rav Eisen points out, based on the *Medrash*, that *teshuva* was one of the things which were created before the world. This tells us that it would be impossible for the world to exist without *teshuva*.

The *Nevi'im* speak extensively about the importance and imperative of *teshuva*.²⁵ If, however, *teshuva* is so important, then what is the significance of *kaparah* and *korbanot*? An aspect of *kaparah* is to cover up the *aveirot*. This helps *teshuva* to be most effective. When the *teshuva* is weak, the *kaparah* can cover up the *aveirot* so the person can move forward with his life, until he is able to do a better *teshuva*. And when the *teshuva* is already strong, the *kaparah* is able to combine with the *teshuva* to both remove every last trace of the *chet*, and to additionally help the person to be even greater than they were beforehand.

In a similar vein, the Maharal²⁶ points out that *kaparah* is able to protect us from danger:

The *machatzit hashekel* (half-shekel) is given as a *teruma* (donation) to Hashem to be a *kaparah* for our souls. Rashi says — This will prevent a plague from occurring, had the census been done by counting. And the *R'eim* wrote — “This was not a *kaparah* for their *aveirot* like all the other *kaparot* in the Torah [but rather a protection].”²⁷

And similarly, the verse²⁸ tells us — “Moshe said to the nation [after the golden calf] — you transgressed a terrible transgression, now I will go up to Hashem; perhaps I will be able to accomplish a *kaparah* for your transgression.” Rashi explains Moshe's words — I shall place a *kofer*, a cleansing and a cover against your *aveirah* to separate between you and the *aveirah*.

One last understanding of *kaparah* is that it is related to the concept of *pidyon* (redemption) which is what the term *kofer nafsho* (ransom or fine for the soul) means.

The Ramban²⁹ writes —

Kaparah is from the language of *kofer nafsho*, which is a *pidyon* (redemption).

The Ibn Ezra adds³⁰ —

My understanding is that the term *l'chapeir alav* is from the root of *kofer*. And this is explicit — “a person should give a *kofer nafsho*,” and it is written there — “*l'chapeir* for their souls.”

The Malbim³¹ also states this —

The concept of *kaparah* is related to *kofer* (ransom or fine) and *pidyon* (redemption).

And finally, Rav Soloveitchik³² explains —

According to Rashi, the words *kaparah* (acquittal) and “*kofer*” (indemnity payment) are derived from the same Hebrew root (“*kuf pey reish*”) and have a common significance... an indemnity must be offered and paid in order to withdraw the liability claim. That indemnity payment is made through *teshuvah* itself. *Kaparah* (acquittal) is the result of the payment of this “ransom” which releases and redeems man from negative consequences.

²⁵ Yechezkel 18/33, Yeshaya 1/44/55, Yirmiyahu 3/33, Hoshea end, *Tehilim* 51

²⁶ *Gur Aryeh: Shemot* 30:15

²⁷ Note #131 in the commentary of Rav Hartman to the Maharal

²⁸ *Shemot* 32:30

²⁹ *Bereshit* 32:21

³⁰ *Shemot* 25:17

³¹ *Vayikra* 5

³² On Repentance – Pinchas H. Peli – Acquittal and Purification