

The Drama of Tashlich

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Many of our yamim tovim incorporate reenactment; witness the biblical Pesach seder and the rabbinic Chanukah menorah lighting, as well as the minhag of holding a simchat beit hashoevah celebration on Succot. Some of these rituals call forth feelings of gratitude for miracles past; the succah is an example of this genre. Other replications of the past, like the Pesach seder, are principally educational. And sometimes we collectively re-live seminal events from our national memory as a means of tefillah. This last idea may explain both the location and the script of Tashlich, and understanding it may deepen and enrich our Tashlich experience.

The Components of the Tashlich Drama

The origins of Tashlich are unclear, possibly traceable to early medieval references to praying near water. By the end of the thirteenth century, though, Tashlich was an established practice in Ashkenazi lands. As the Maharil³¹ explained, Jews would “walk to seas and rivers on Rosh Hashanah, after the meal, to cast all of our sins into the depths of the sea.”³²

Other early sources included recitation of pesukim from the close of the book of Michah:

*Who is a G-d like You, Who pardons iniquity and overlooks transgression for the remnant of His heritage? He does not maintain His wrath forever, for He desires kindness. He will once again show us mercy, He will suppress our iniquities. You will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea. Grant truth to Jacob, kindness to Abraham, as You swore to our forefathers in days of old.*³³

Michah 7:18-20

מי קל כמוך נושא עון ועובר על
פשע לשארית נחלתו לא החזיק
לעד אפו כי חפץ חסד הוא ישוב
ינחמנו יכבוש עונותנו ותשליך
במצלות ים כל חטאותם תתן אמת
ליעקב חסד לאברהם אשר
נשבעת לאבתנו מימי קדם.

מיכה ז:יח-כ

This combination of a riverside venue and Michah’s concluding message may be viewed as a unique tefillah for G-d’s mercy. We offer this tefillah not so much in formal prayer as in drama, a

³¹ Minhagim Rosh haShanah 9

³² The Maharil frowned upon the halachically controversial custom of bringing fish food; to him, the essential custom was simply to stand at a body of water, and throwing bread involved potential desecration of Yom Tov. His concern is likely rooted in Mishnah Beitzah 3:1, prohibiting feeding fish on Yom Tov. For varying explanations of the prohibition, see Rashi and Tosafot to Beitzah 23b, as well Rashi to Shabbat 106b ואין. For a lenient argument, see Maharam Lublin on Beitzah 23b.

³³ Radak and Rashi understand that Yitzchak is included in “to our forefathers,” but Ibn Ezra says Yitzchak is excluded because he was the father of Edom. Ibn Ezra says that Avraham would have been excluded because of Yishmael, but for the fact that the covenant began with him.

performance highlighting three major components of our national search for forgiveness: the merit of our ancestors, the thirteen attributes of Divine mercy, and the Divine promise of future redemption.

The Merit of our Ancestors

The first component is zechut avot, the merit of our ancestors. Since the day G-d pledged the land of Canaan to Yitzchak because of “the oath that I swore to your father Avraham,³⁴” Jews have known that the righteousness of our ancestors would pay dividends for their descendants. The sages assert³⁵ that even Moshe Rabbeinu’s post-Eigel prayers were not accepted until he invoked the merit of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. Today we cite our ancestors’ greatness in the thrice-daily amidah, and emphasize it in the musaf amidah of Rosh Hashanah.

Tashlich, too, emphasizes that ancestral merit, reenacting Avraham’s walk to the akeidah.

This is a memorial for the akeidah in which Avraham Avinu passed through a river until his neck, and he said, ‘Save me, G-d, for the water has come to my life!’ This was the Satan, who became like a river in order to keep him from the akeidah.

Maharil Minhagim Rosh haShanah 9

זכר לעקדה שעבר אברהם אבינו בנהר
עד צוארו, ואמר הושיעה ה' כי באו
מים עד נפש והוא השטן שנעשה כמו
נהר לעכב אותו מן העקדה
מהרי"ל מנהגים ראש השנה ט

We walk to the river on Rosh haShanah to remind G-d of that historic willingness of the Jew to sacrifice his life at Divine command. However, we do not simply **mention** the akeidah and its river; we **reenact** it, demonstrating our personal commitment to following in our ancestors’ footsteps. We claim their legacy of martyrdom as our own, and so enhance the appeal of our tefillah.

This enhancement is necessary because we cannot make infinite claims on the basis of our predecessors’ deeds; the sages asserted that the merit of our ancestors has ended.³⁶ Therefore, at Tashlich we do not seek aid in the merit of what our ancestors did. Rather, we seek aid in the merit of **our own readiness** to continue their legacy. We do not merely *mention* Avraham – *are* Avraham.³⁷

This is one part of the Tashlich tefillah: G-d, please forgive us in the merit of our readiness to give our lives for Your commands, as Avraham was ready to give his own life long ago.

Thirteen Attributes of Divine Mercy

Having established our merit as a new generation of Avrahams, we then adopt the petitionary words of the prophet Michah as our own, to pray for forgiveness. Our choice of Michah’s words for Tashlich is unusual, and this selection offers a further example of reenactment.

³⁴ Bereishit 26:3

³⁵ Shabbat 30a

³⁶ Shabbat 55a

³⁷ Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, in annual shiurim delivered on Tisha b’Av, offered another hope. Rav Soloveitchik contended that even though the merit of our ancestors has reached the limit of its influence, *brit avot*, the contract between G-d and our ancestors, endures eternally.

Our choice of Michah's prayer is surprising because G-d provided us with the definitive prayer for forgiveness, the list of thirteen attributes of Divine mercy, in a dialogue with Moshe after the Golden Calf:

HaShem, HaShem, powerful G-d, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, great in kindness and truth, who guards kindness for thousands of generations, who forgives sin, rebellion and transgression, and who cleanses.

Shemot 34:6-7

ה' ה' קל רחום וחנון ארך אפים
ורב חסד ואמת נצר חסד
לאלפים נושא עון ופושע וחסאה
ונקה
שמות לד:ו-ז

Per the sages, this was meant to be a timeless prayer:

G-d cloaked Himself like a shliach tzibbur and demonstrated the order of prayer for Moshe. He said: Whenever Israel sins, let them practice thus before Me, and I will forgive them.

Rosh Hashana 17b

מלמד שנתעטף הקדוש ברוך הוא
כשליח צבור והראה לו למשה סדר
תפלה אמר לו כל זמן שישראל חוטאין
יעשו לפני כסדר הזה ואני מוחל להם
ראש השנה יז:

Indeed, all through the selichot preparation for Rosh Hashanah we employ G-d's words to Moshe, and on Yom Kippur we repeat that original text many times over.

Why, then, do we employ Michah's words rather than G-d's text, at tashlich? The Zohar³⁸ does identify Michah's pesukim as another version of those thirteen attributes of Divine mercy,³⁹ but why quote a later prophet instead of the Divine original?

The answer may lie in our motif of reenactment, of re-living the actions of our ancestors in order to enhance our tefillah.

G-d, not the sinner, narrates the original list of attributes. Further, the petitioner addressed by G-d was Moshe, not a sinner but a spiritual broker seeking forgiveness on behalf of his client, the Jewish people. Moshe was not even present when the nation built the Calf. G-d even wished to save the innocent Moshe and destroy those who had sinned. We are not Moshe.

Michah, on the other hand, presented his version of the thirteen attributes of Divine mercy as a part of the sinful nation despite his personal innocence, speaking in the first person for much of the chapter in which those words appear:

"Woe is me, for I am like the last pickings of the summer fruit," Michah begins the chapter, declaring his personal pain. "As for me, I put my hope in G-d and await the G-d of my salvation; my G-d will hear me," he continues, expressing his trust in G-d. "Do not rejoice over me, my enemy, for though I fell, I will rise! Though I sit in the darkness, G-d is a light unto me," Michah cries, putting his faith in G-d despite his guilt. And, "I shall bear the fury of G-d for I have sinned

³⁸ Zohar to Parshat Naso

³⁹ And see Rav Moshe Cordovero's expansion upon the connection between these pesukim and the thirteen attributes of Divine Mercy, in Tomer Devorah

unto Him,” Michah acknowledges, performing tzidduk hadin: The sin is mine, I am guilty, I have trespassed.

Michah’s concluding declaration of the thirteen attributes of Divine mercy is that of a personal penitent, and so this is an ideal selection for our reenactment. We are Michah, and we reenact his petition to earn forgiveness.

History of Divine Forgiveness

Finally, after playing the role of Avraham to demonstrate our merit, and after emulating Michah to plead for forgiveness, we take on a third role, that of Nechemiah, to daven for future redemption.

Rav Reuven Margoliot pointed out that our waterside Tashlich evokes the image of Nechemiah addressing the Jews who returned for the second Beit haMikdash, by the shaar hamayim, the Water Gate on the Temple Mount. On Rosh haShanah, Ezra held a public reading of the Torah, and the nation, reminded of their flaws, acknowledged their shortcomings and wept. Nechemiah then told the nation not to weep, and he declared by the Water Gate:

Go eat rich foods and drink sweet drinks, and send portions to those who have none prepared, for today is sacred to our Master. Do not be sad; the joy of G-d is your strength.

Nechemiah 8:10

לכו אכלו משמנים ושתו ממתקים ושלחו
מנות לאין נכון לא כי קדוש היום לאדנינו
ואל תעצבו כי חדות ה' היא מעזכם.
נחמיה ח:י

This pasuk is generally cited to support our practice of feasting, rather than fasting, on Rosh haShanah. There is more to this image at Tashlich, though, for Nechemiah specifically chose to gather the nation at the Water Gate for this moment.

Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov⁴⁰ explained that this gate was known as the Water Gate because, “There the water trickles, and it will exit from beneath the threshold of the House.” Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov was referring to Zechariah’s prophecy⁴¹ of a messianic day, in which a great flow of water would emerge from the beit hamikdash. This spot, then, is associated with more than forgiveness; it is associated with future redemption.

At Tashlich, we place ourselves in Nechemiah’s shoes, standing by a river just as that ancient leader stood by the Water Gate, site of future miracles. There, we declare our hope for the ultimate forgiveness and redemption.

One More Reenactment: Yishmael

These then, are our three Tashlich models: Avraham’s willingness to serve, Michah’s appeal for Divine mercy, and Nechemiah’s prophecy of redemption. But there is a fourth model: Yishmael.

⁴⁰ Shekalim 6:3

⁴¹ Zechariah 14:8

Yishmael was an adolescent when he was cast out of his home for his behavior toward his half-brother, Yitzchak. Yishmael and his mother, Hagar, wandered in the desert, and eventually collapsed with thirst. Yishmael cried out to G-d, and G-d responded by saving his life.⁴²

As Rabbi Yitzchak explained,⁴³ by this time Yishmael was already guilty of heinous sins against Yitzchak, and he – as well as his descendants – would yet incur guilt for far more. Nonetheless, G-d chose to view Yishmael “as he was,⁴⁴” there and then. Yishmael was fully righteous at the moment of his prayer, and so G-d rescued him.

Even as we stand by a river at Tashlich and declare our hope that G-d will cast our sins into the sea, G-d is well aware of what we have done, and of what we are likely to do again. Nonetheless, like Yishmael, we create a space of righteousness in the moment, and daven that this will be enough.

May our evocation of Avraham, Michah and Nechemiah, in a moment seized, Yishmael-style, this Rosh Hashanah, earn us an inscription for a shana tova.

⁴² Bereishit 21

⁴³ Rosh haShanah 16b, amplified in Bereishit Rabbah 53

⁴⁴ Bereishit 21:17

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