

Rosh Hashana

The Shining Face of the Kohen Gadol and Personal Forgiveness Rabbi Marianne Novak - Class of 2019

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When I was growing up, my father was a rabbi at a number of congregations. On Yom Kippur I always stood in awe of my Dad's Torah and his piety. When it came to the *Avodah* part of the traditional *musaf* liturgy specific for Yom Kippur, my father would have the *chazan* read the paragraphs in an undertone while he read a most beautiful English rendition that truly captured the essence of the *Kohen Gadol's* (High Priest's) work. It was **that** dramatic reading that served as my *peirush*, my interpretation of an ancient and admittedly bloody and scary ritual.

Last year at this time, the Jewish social media world was abuzz with a powerful and beautiful new song called *Avodah* by Israeli-French artist, Yishai Ribo. The song was a certifiable hit in Israel and the U.S. On our most recent trip to Israel (BC- before Covid-19), my husband and I got to hear Ribo along with renowned Jewish artist, Avraham Fried, sing this or more specifically *daven* this song to and with 9,000+ fans, all of whom knew every word of this stirring melody by heart.

Ribo brilliantly refashions the ancient liturgy, making it accessible for the masses. For example, Ribo takes the description of the accounting (*achat- achat v'achat*) the *Kohen Gadol* did while sprinkling the blood of the sacrifices in the Holy of Holies, the *Kodesh Kedoshim*, and turns it into the 'counting' or assessment we make of our own character.

Ribo, by incorporating the thoughts of Rav Kook and others, broadens that review to also all the good things that we **do** and the ways that we **are** good. Ribo encourages us to embrace what true humility means when we stand before the Almighty. Humility in our tradition does not mean to see ourselves as only a collection of bad actions, deeds and thoughts, as nothingness. Humility means to have an honest assessment of who we are—the bad **and** the good.

Only then can you improve and maybe more importantly, you can get out of your own way, get beyond yourself to be able to truly serve God. This way of humility is a way to free yourself, remove the noise in your head, to renew your relationship with God and potentially do great things — maybe even like Moshe Rabbanu, who the Torah tells us was the most humble.

At the end of the *Avodah* pageantry—after all the sacrificing, sprinkling, atonement, testimony, immersions and costume changes—the *Kohen Gadol* with his face radiant, hurries to put on his own, plain clothes.

'The look upon his face was that of the sun coming out in all of its might, and he hastened, ran and put on his own clothes.'

תאר מגמתו כצאת השמש בגבורה
תקף יודך ועטה בגד הוננו...

Ribo's refrain is

'He came out from the place he had left and trembled in the place where he had stood, took off his golden garments and put on his own clothes. And all the people and the priest would

יצא ממקום שיצא ורעד במקום שעמד
פשט בגדי זהב לבש בגדי עצמו

accompany him to his own home and it was a festive day for his loved ones...'

וכל העם והכהנים היו מלווים אותו לביתו
ויום טוב לאוהביו...

The face of the *Kohen Gadol* is shining— a big relief- because he made it out alive- *b'li pegah*-without injury-with his encounter with God. Perhaps he's shining because he knows God will forgive him and his family and the entire Jewish people and he is beaming with pride because of a job well done.

As a youngster, I was always jealous of the *Kohen Gadol* at this point in the liturgical narrative. He got to put on comfy clothes and go home. My family couldn't go home and rest. We had to stay dressed up, polite and engaged. We were required to continue being like angels – as some in our tradition describe our state on Yom Kippur – at the same level of attention we had been maintaining all day. There was no time to process, no time to 'come down' so to speak and certainly no changing into sweats. My discomfort aside, I guess my greatest disappointment was that whatever transformation I might have had on Yom Kippur wouldn't have a chance to be realized until I finally got home—got back to real life.

For like the *Kohen Gadol*, we all have a chance today to feel the warmth of God's presence and indeed we act like angels today. But only today, because while we can act like angels, we **are still** human. At the end of the day, we will go back home and take off our wings.

The *Kohen Gadol* was able to bring the essence of the day into his life and his home and transform, change himself and those around him. But he doesn't stay in the *Kodesh Kedoshim*.— He doesn't live there because as a human, he really couldn't. He's accompanied by the other Kohanim to his house.

And so when listening to the *Chazan* read this *Avodah* service (and perhaps some of us will be hearing Ribo's beautiful melody and lyrics in our own heads), let's use the experience to help us change, to transform while remaining human.

Now more than ever perhaps that transformation is a not so much of a change but a recognition of our true humanity and limits. It means that this year we will need to use the extra boost of heavenly help to amplify certain aspects of being human that are also Godlike — compassion and kindness — and to remember that most of all those traits must be used for our own selves **first**, before helping anyone else.

We have all suffered great losses this year. Some have unthinkably lost loved ones. The message from the *Kohen Gadol's* return home is to not set the impossible bar of becoming an angel but rather being the best humans we can be. With God's countenance shining on us, we too can beam as brightly as the *Kohen Gadol* and have that light lift us up with love and forgiveness.



Rabbi Marianne Novak received her AB in Political Science from Barnard College and her JD from Washington University School of Law in St. Louis. She has served as the Endowment Director at the Jewish Federation of St. Louis and also helped start the Women's Tefillah Group at Bais Abraham. Rabbi Marianne then moved to Skokie, Illinois, became a Gabbait for the Skokie Women's Tefillah Group, and taught Bat Mitzvah students. Rabbi Marianne is an instructor and curriculum developer for the Florence Melton Adult School of Jewish Learning and taught Tanakh at Rochelle Zelle Jewish High School. She has lectured for many Jewish organizations and synagogues, and writes a blog for the Times of Israel. Rabbi Marianne lives in Skokie with her husband Noam Stadlan and family.