SHABBOS SHUVA DROSHA 1996
Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

We learn in the eighth section of the eighth chapter in the Mishnah Yoma the famous statement of Rabbi Akiba: "Happy are you, Israel. Before Whom are your purified and Who purifies you? Your father in heaven, as it is said in the prophet Ezekiel, 'And I will throw upon you pure water and you shall be pure', and as it is said in the prophet Jeremiah, 'The mikvah of Israel is G-d'. Just like a mikvah purifies the unclean, so does the Holy One, Blessed be He, purify Israel."

There are two distinct levels of uncleanllness in Judaism. When we encounter the ugliness of the world, as personified by dead rodents, weasels, etc., we can purify ourselves by going into a mikvah. We, through our own efforts, can purify ourselves. However, when we come into contact with human death, we cannot purify ourselves unaided. We need the help of others. Ritual impurity in Judaism is really a psychological state. It has to do with our giving up hope, with our becoming depressed. That's why the word mikvah in Hebrew means not only a pool of living water in which we immerse ourselves, but it also means hope. When we see the ugliness of the world and we despair, we cannot unaided turn our despair into feelings of optimism and challenge and can view the difficulties ahead of us as opportunities to better ourselves and the world. However, when we come into contact with the death of loved ones, especially, the depression can become too much and at that point in time we need the warmth and presence of others to allow us to regain hope.

That's why Rabbi Akiba says first that G-d says, "And I will throw upon you pur water." The in the ancient days when a person came into contact with human death, they had to have

the ashes of the red heifer mixed with water and sprinkled upon them on the third and seventh day before they could become ritually clean, before they could regain the optimism necessary to be G-d's partner in creation. Other challenges we can overcome by jumping in the mikvah ourselves. G-d has given us the Torah and the inspiration of the heavens and the earth to regain our sense of joy and continue to be His partner in creation. Many times we, as individuals, are overcome with out own sense of despair and guilt becuase of the sins we have committed.

On Yom Kippur G-d, as we say in the Neila, extends his hand to posheem. Posheem means people who even sin on principle, not because they are weak but because at the time they want to challenge G-d and all morality. On Yom Kippur G-d reaches out to us. All through the year we can do teshuva, but it is hard during the rest of the year since we have to take the initiative. The air is not filled with ideas of returning, teshuva, ideas of changing. Then even if we are only hatoyim, which means people who basically miss the mark, our intents are good but we just always seem to say the wrong thing and always seem to hurt people. Even then we really have to take the initiative. It is a paradox that even though during the year we say that G-d is L'Ayla, above, on Yom Kippur we say that He is L'Ayla L'Ayla, very high above. He is closer to us now than the rest of the year. We recognize His demands on us more during this period of year. That's why He is very high, but He is very close to us beckoning us to return.

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We all know that in Jewish law there are two distinct periods of mourning. There is the first period during the time of the death until the burial. A person is then called an onen. During this period of time a person does not have to fulfill any positive commandments, only the negative commandments. He does not put on tephillin, he does not pray, he does not say a brocha before his meals or bench after. Judaism recognizes that at this time it is hard for a person to see the justice in the world. A person feels that his life is nothing more than that of an animal life. We are no more than animals, as we mention in the Neila prayer. We come and we go. Can we really accomplish anything? Do our lives really make any difference? It is hard to feel that our lives have meaning at this time. Everything seems so senseless. We all felt this way when Gil Epstein was murdered, a brilliant young man with his whole life in front of him, murdered for a few cents in a robbery. It was terribly depressing. Hope seems to disappear. Judaism does not demand that we conjure up energies to express things we really cannot feel. This period of mourning lasts until the grave is filled in when the mourner is asked to say the Kaddish. There is nothing in the Kaddish about death. Kaddish speaks about G-d's coming kingdom when all pain and death and suffering will be overcome. The reason a mourner says Kaddish is because after his loved one is buried, he should never feel that his loved one's life was useless or senseless. His loved one contributed to the coming perfection of the world. His life played a part in bringing the future redemption in which even death will be overcome. All pain and suffering will end and we will understand G-d's plan in the fullest. Each of us has a part in this plan because each of us is a part of the community of Israel.

That's why in our prayers on Yom Kippur we say, "G-d, Who forgives and atones for our sins and for the sins of the House of Israel and our guilt He removes every year." Each of us has two kedushas, one as a Jew and one as a human being. We ask G-d to forgive our sins and allow us to continue in the coming year, and we also ask Him to forgive our sins as a part of the House of Israel. We are G-d's partners in trying to bring about the redemption of the world. Anyone who has played a part in this, his or her life has meaning. We say, "And He shall remove our guilt." What does this mean? It means in Hebrew destruction. As individuals we may be destroyed, we may vanish from the scene in this world, but the people of Israel live on. The Jewish people is indestructable. When we attach ourselves to it by trying to lead just and good lives, we, too, gain immortality, not physical immortality but our efforts count. They will not be lost. Life has meaning. There is hope. Death does not destroy all hope.

That's why we say that we need others to overcome human death. When we are together with others who believe as we do, that fortifies us and allows us to realize that the loved one made a contribution to this world. Other ills and ugliness in the world we can overcome unaided. We can attain hope by ourselves, but death requires a community to overcome. We know that our lives are not meaningless if we attach them to high moral purposes and a life of good deeds. May each of us continue to do so so that we will all be blessed with a happy, healthy, and good year. Amen.