

“For on this day, he shall provide atonement for you to cleanse you, from all of your sins.” (16:30)

Yom Kippur provides atonement – if it is not too late. *Horav Yitzchak Blazar, z.l.*, the famous *Rav Itzele Peterburger*, primary disciple of *Horav Yisrael Salanter, z.l.*, spoke prior to *Rosh Hashanah* in the *Bais HaMussar* of Kovno. After his ethical discourse, the assemblage began to recite various *perakim*, chapters, from *Sefer Tehillim*. At the end, together they recited the verses of *Shema Koleinu*, Hear our Voices, a heartrending appeal which follows the *Selichos* prayer. When they reached the *pasuk*, *Al tashlicheinu l'eis ziknah*, “Do not discard us when we grow old,” *Rav Itzele* stopped, turned around to the *kahal*, those gathered in prayer, and related the following story:

The Czar Nikolai conscripted men into the Russian Army in a manner unprecedented in its cruelty. Once they were drafted, it was extremely difficult to leave. Being a soldier in the Czar's army was a lifelong ordeal. Anyone of draftable age would hide from the “recruiters,” knowing fully well what it would mean if they were conscripted. Anyone caught avoiding the draft was immediately sent to Siberia. There, they were forced to do hard labor in the frigid cold without any letup. Most of those who ended up in Siberia were never heard from again.

One day, the Czar made an announcement to all of his subjects. As a one-time dispensation, he was allowing anyone who had previously been avoiding conscription to come forward and all would be forgiven. They would be “accepted” into the army, and their pasts would be overlooked.

The announcement provided results for the Czar. Tens of thousands of Russians came out of hiding. Young, strong men, middle-aged and older men, stood together in the recruitment centers waiting to be accepted into the Czar's army. As bad as the army was, it was a fate that was far more favorable than Siberia. The officers walked into the rooms and immediately separated the young, strong men from the older applicants. These young men were immediately inducted into the army, while the others were taken to a kangaroo court where an army judge was to decide their fate.

“How could this be?” they clamored to the judge. “We were told that if we come forward, we would be inducted into the army.” The judge looked at them and laughed, “Yes, the young, strong ones will be inducted into the army. What does the army need from you? You are no longer strong. You cannot fight. As far as the Czar is concerned, you are worthless. Yes, we will take you to Siberia where you can live out the rest of your lives. You should have come forth earlier when you could have provided a service. Now, we have no use for you.”

As *Rav Itzele* finished the story, all those assembled began to cry. A number of them fainted. They understood the meaning of the story and its relationship to the *Selichah*, *Al tashlicheinu*.

Rav Itzele continued, “We entreat Hashem, *Hashiveinu Hashem eilecha v'nashuvah*, Return us

Hashem to You, and we will repent. When a young man, with his whole life ahead of him, utters these words, there is some validity to them. He will be accepted by Hashem. He will grow and mature as a returnee. When an older man, however, one who has enjoyed much of life, supplicates Hashem with these words, is there any efficacy to his request? This is why we cry out to Hashem, 'Please do not discard us when we grow old. When we age, we need even greater compassion. Please, Hashem, do not discard us like a worthless object that has little value.'"

Perhaps we may supplement this with a thought from the *Mezritcher Maggid, z.l.*. He explains that every person is sent to this world to perform a function, to fulfill a purpose. Once that purpose has been completed, he is called back. In order to increase our longevity, every person should accept upon himself new and greater responsibilities, so that there will be a "need" for him to remain in this world.