

## Repentance, Prayer, and Charity

### *Thought for the Day*

*Ephraim Borowski (Director, Scottish Council of Jewish Communities)*

*Broadcast on Radio Scotland, 25 September 2012*

Tonight is the start of Yom Kippur, the most solemn day of the Jewish year, and probably the most universally observed in fasting, prayer, and contemplation. Many years ago a cartoon in the *New Yorker* showed Times Square deserted; the caption read simply “Yom Kippur”. Someone commented last week that you can feel the uniqueness of this day not in the holy city of Jerusalem, which rests every Shabbat, but in Tel Aviv, the so-called “city that never sleeps” – except on Yom Kippur!

So my Thought for Today is that Yom Kippur is the Day of Thoughts for the Year – a day of reflection, self-examination, soul-searching, reappraisal, resolution. The key prayer is a poetic acknowledgement that we are not masters of our own destiny, that life is “like a passing shadow, a fading flower, a fleeting cloud”. For Jews in this country, this prayer is so emblematic that I was astonished to discover that it is only known in western Europe, where its almost mythical status is partly because of the tradition that it was composed by an 11th century rabbi as he was being tortured for not giving up his faith.

The climax of this dying declaration, shouted aloud by the congregation, is that “repentance, prayer, and charity can forestall a bad future”. On the surface, this sounds like a supernatural pay-back – put enough in the collection box and you’ll get a voucher for a year of health and happiness!

But it’s not magic. Repentance just means recognising that we might have done wrong to others; the Hebrew word for prayer is derived from a root meaning introspection or self-assessment; and what is charity if not active concern for the welfare of others? So the message of Yom Kippur is a universal one: that from time to time we should all give ourselves the space to reflect on our actions, to consider how we may have harmed others, and to resolve to be more compassionate in future. May that make for a happy, healthy, and successful year ahead for us all.

*Ephraim Borowski*

*Thought for the Day: Radio Scotland, 25 September 2012*