



Parashat Shoftim



English version

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TO REACH MY SOUL

When we think about Elul, the first thing that comes to mind is Teshuva. When we think about Teshuva, the first thing that comes to mind is, *I have no idea how to do this*. Every year, when we try to interpret Teshuva to ourselves, we get the same response. *Blank!*

Why is it like that? It's something like what happened to me last week, when I spoke to an operator. I asked her what numbers I need to dial to reach her directly next time, without going through the whole operating system and process. She said to me, "I don't know. I never tried to call myself."

We all have thoughts how to get to other people; we think a lot of how we would like to change other people, but we rarely think thoughts of how to change ourselves, or how to get through to ourselves. What buttons do we need to press?

The answer is tricky, because Teshuva is tricky. Real Teshuva doesn't just happen because you know the Shaarei Teshuva manual. You can't change who you are by trying to change who you are. That is not how people change. Why not? Why can't I just regret the past and take on some New Year's Resolutions? Change like that does not work, because to behave differently, you need to think differently. Resolutions don't work, if you don't think differently. And only by challenging your belief system, do you really think differently, do you take a new path. That is the only way to get into the Teshuva game. In our Davening, חונן הדעת, the blessing of knowledge comes before the blessing of תשובה, the blessing that G-d

wants our repentance. Because the way to really repent, the only way, is by challenging "the obvious", or the way you think. (Netivot Shalom) Being *challenged* by something or someone. By asking yourself the right questions, or by someone else asking you the right questions, or by being in the environment that asks you the right questions. Once you are blessed by G-d with a new understanding of the truth of your world, G-d is interested in your repentance. And then, we change by default, after realizing a deeper level of truth.

Teshuva comes from the word והשבות אל לבבך, letting something settle within your heart; it is an inward process. It is not as much about repentance as it is about discovering a deeper truth in life. And there is always a deeper truth in life. You need to go inward and find it. The Rebbe from Slonim writes that teshuva is a whole life's journey of asking right questions, and it is horribly misrepresented when translated by the word "repentance". Repentance is about being better. Teshuva is about becoming different. Being different is much more than being better. Most of Rabbenu Yonah's Shaarei Teshuva is the outline, the elements, the process, the Mitzvah; but all that is just the manual of Teshuva. The theory of it. You did not get into the game yet, you did not get behind the wheel, until you do Cheshbon Hanefesh. Until you call yourself. You have to know the right buttons to press; you need to know how to dial yourself. In Chovot Halevovot, the subject of Teshuva is first, and then, there is the subject of Cheshbon Hanefesh, challenging you with the questions that will make you think differently.



Cheshbon Hanefesh is the only way to play the game, because it is the only way to change your path, and that is what G-d is expecting of you. יעזוב איש דרכו ואיש און מחשבותיו *Let a man leave his path, and a person, leave his false thinking.* G-d does not ask of you only a change in behavior. He asks that you change your *path*, the way you think and believe, your worldview.

This is a great challenge. Because we can be doing something wrong, even though we think we are doing something right. You can be living a whole life, thinking you were doing the right thing, but being so off. כדלים וכרשים דפקנו דלתיך *Like paupers, we knock on Your Door!* In Selichot, we mention how we are so poor in our performance of mitzvot and in our level of observing them. Because even if we are as full of Mitzvot as a pomegranate, it could be that we are lacking in some fundamentals. Our belief system could be way off. Our intentions could be way off. The way we look at the world could be way off. Unless we are studying the Cheshbon HaNefesh of the Chovot Helvovot. This is why Teshuva is something that can be done, and should be done, every day of our lives (Shabbat 153a, Iggeret HaRamban). Even if you are a Tzaddik.

The Chidushei Harim gives us an example of how the “righteous” could be way off, without Cheshbon Hanefesh. R Yochanan taught, *Without the Torah, we would have learnt modest behavior from the cat, not to steal from the ant, ...* (Eiruvin 100b) King Solomon taught, *Lazy one! Go to the ant and learn her ways, and become wise. That she has no police officer or ruler (to fear).* (Mishlei 6, 6)... The Midrash explains this: *There was once an ant that dropped a piece of wheat. All of its friends came and smelled it, and not one took it, until the one who dropped it came back to get it.* (Devraim Rabbah 5b) *The ant brings everything it gathers into a nest to store for the winter. And not one ant will take from another’s nest.* (Aruch Erech צנע)

Oh My G-d!

One of the most powerful parts of Selichot is, שומר ישראל שמור שארית ישראל ואל יאבד ישראל האומרים בכל יום שמע ישראל. *Oh! Watcher of Israel, Watch over the remainder of Israel, and do not allow Israel to*

The Chidushei Harim asks, But isn’t everything that the ant gathers stolen goods?!? He does not plant, or work the field!? How can the ant be considered the role model for not stealing, if it never made anything of its own, its whole life?

This is what happens when we learn how to think from the ant, and not from the Torah. Without the Torah, it would be a faulty system, because we would learn from the ant how not to steal, while the ant is the biggest thief there is!

The first Cheshbon of Cheshbon Hanefesh is that you are nothing, without G-d. You are just an ant, who is taking from G-d everything that you have, and everything that you are. You have no merit to exist, because you were born without any merits. You are one big Chessed from G-d. That is all you are. What a humbling thought!

This humbling thought is a great prerequisite to Teshuva. Because every sin has some self-justification behind it. As if we are “even” with G-d. G-d does a lot for me, *but I also do a lot for Him.* WRONG! ולא שוה לנו וטרנו ממצותיך ומשפטיך ולא שוה לנו, *ואתה צדיק על כל הבא עלינו ואנחנו הרשענו*, Each time we say Ashamnu, we do Teshuva on trying to present this self-justification. Because all sin starts from the way we think. And if you change your behavior, your habit will bring you back in a month, a year, or some time in the near future, to your old habit. Even if we refrain from sin in the present, for a little while, we are prone to being activated by a trigger when it comes around. But if you change the way you think, you have made a change for a lifetime. Because when there is no self-justification, YOU have changed.

How ironic that there are precisely 30 instructions in the Cheshbon HaNefesh of the Chovot HaLevovot. One for each day of the month of Elul!

These 30 thoughts are the way that you contact yourself. This is the phone number of your soul.

be lost, those who say each day, Shema Yisrael. The power we have, the **merit we have not to be lost** is our saying Shema Yisrael.

R Shlomo Levenstien writes in his sefer "Umatok Haor" that the Pesti Herlap, Hungarian newspaper, in the times of WW1, posted a letter from a Hungarian soldier to his wife. Here it is - word for word. "I ask you a favor. Please ask our Jewish neighbor, Chaim, to translate and explain the words "Shema Yisrael." Because when the deadly bullets fly over our heads, and the soldiers are falling like the grain at harvest, then the Jewish soldiers cry out Shema Yisrael, and they are saved from death, while their friend soldiers that are gentiles, are killed. And right away, when Chaim explains this power of Shema to you, please let me know! This way, when I will be in danger, it will save my life!"

In Parashat Shoftim, we learn that *not every Jewish soldier* was allowed out to war. The Kohen would tell a person who had a new vineyard, house, or wife that he could not fight. And if he had fear, he could not go out to war. What type of fear are we talking about? Fear of sin. The Talmud tells us that what is being referred to is fear from even a sin of speaking between putting on Tefillin of the hand and Tefillin of the head. (Sotah, 44b)

And then, the Kohen said the most powerful thing that we need to remind ourselves each and every day. וְאָמַר אֲלֵהֶם שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל אַתֶּם קָרְבָּיִם הַיּוֹם לַמִּלְחָמָה עַל־אֵיבֵיכֶם אֶל־יְרֵד לְבַבְכֶם אֶל־תִּירָאוּ וְאֶל־תִּחַפְּזוּ וְאֶל־תִּעַרְצוּ מִפְּנֵיהֶם: The Kohen tells them, *Listen Oh Yisrael! You are approaching war today on your enemies; do not fear, do not become tense, and do not be impressed by them!* Rashi reflects on the words of the Kohen, where he uses the words Shema Yisrael to begin his speech, שמע ישראל - אפילו אין בכם זכות, כדאי אתם שיושיע אתכם: The Kohen encouraged them before war - *Even if all you have in your favor is the Mitzvah of Kriat Shema alone, you are worthy of His salvation.*

This is somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, one is to fear even slight sins, like speaking between putting on tefillin of the hand and tefillin of the head. This seems to imply that only great tsaddikim were allowed to fight. On the other hand, just for the merit of Kriat Shema, alone, despite all other transgressions, one is worthy of

being saved!!!!? How can we understand this? What merit does Shema have, that can outweigh not only minor sins like speaking between donning Tefillin, but even greater sins that a person may have that render him deserving of harm, and save the person when going out to war?

The answer seems to be that of course, if the Mitzvah of Kriat Shema is just a matter of reciting it, then it does not possess that great merit. But Rabbenu Bachye gives us a hint to solve this paradox, בזכות שמע ישראל שהוא פרשת היחוד אתם נרצחים. *The merit of Shema that is the Parasha of Yichud, and in its merit you will win the war.* What is the mitzvah of Yichud? Of saying that G-d is One? Of believing that G-d is One? (See Rashi Devarim 6;4. Re'em. Gur Aryeh)

The Kli Yakar (Vaetchanan 6;4) quotes the Talmud in Pesachim. (50a) The Talmud asks, why does the passuk tell us ביום ההוא יהיה ה' אחד ושמו א' , that G-d will be One and His Name One only at the end of time, when G-d is King of all the Land? Why is G-d now, before Mashiach, not considered One? And the Talmud answers, *This world is not like the next world. In this world, on good news one recites the blessing Baruch Hatov Vehemetiv, and on bad news, one recites the blessing Baruch Dayan Haemet, Blessed is the Judge of Truth. But in the next world, everything is Hatov Vehemetiv.* In the Next World, when all the pain and sorrow are over and everyone is praising G-d, they will not see bad things happening. Then, in the times of Mashiach, it will only be ה' אחד, One YHVH. This is because the Name of YHVH is the Attribute of Mercy. And the Name of Elokim is the Attribute of Judgement. So in this world, before Mashiach, it is אלוקינו ה', a mix of Good/ Mercy and seeming Bad/Judgement. But we, His people, know that it is really the same YHVH of Mercy that will be One in the Times of Mashiach, and *everything* is good. But for the rest of the nations, only then, when Mashiach comes, will everyone use the Name of Mercy, of YHVH. And realize how everything is good.

With this, the Kli Yakar explains that there are many times in life when we feel confused by G-d



and Judaism. Like when good things happen to bad people, or when bad things happen to good people. These puzzling occurrences make it seem as if, Chas Veshalom, G-d is inconsistent. Sometimes, He uses His Attribute of Mercy, YHVH, and times are great. But sometimes, He uses His Attribute of Judgement, Elokim, and times look bleak. Other nations of the world would simply explain these seeming contradictions by saying that there are different powers in the universe, different gods. But we believe that both mercy and judgement, the things that look good, and the things that look bad, all emanate from One power, from One G-d. ה' אלוקינו ה' אחד

I believe that the hardest Halacha in all Shulchan Aruch to keep is to bless Hashem for bad news with the same joy that you bless G-d for good news. (OH 222;3 230;5) To be able to say and believe that whatever G-d does is for the best. That it is all ultimately His Mercy.

The Mishna in Berachot (Berachot 60b) learns this from the Passuk we say so often, without realizing what we are saying. ואהבת את ה' אלוקיך בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך ובכל מאודך. You have to love Hashem your G-d with all your hearts, with all your soul, and with

all of your מאוד. What does that mean, to love G-d with all of your מאוד, with all your all? בכל מדה ומדה כלל שמודד לך הוי מודה לו מאוד מאוד With whatever measure G-d measures to you, thank Him very, very much!! The Tiferet Yisrael (on the Mishna) says that if one wants to overcome his Mazal, if he can thank G-d for the bad, he can change his luck! (Try it! It works!)

The Talmud teaches that once Hillel was coming home, and as he came close to his town, he heard screams and cries from one of the houses. Hillel said, I am sure that the cries are not from my house. How did Hillel know that his family was not the one under duress? The answer is amazing. He didn't know. But he knew that he had trained his family to accept the bad, to bless G-d for the bad, and if something bad was happening at home, Hillel knew that they would not be screaming about it. They would take it calmly.

The secret power of Shema is, as the Tur writes, that when someone accepts painful news with love, that is "the" sign that he is G-d's servant. And G-d will save His servants, allowing them to flip over their mazal completely, from Judgement to Mercy.

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