



Parashat Shoftim



English version

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## TWO WAYS TO TESHUVA

I was looking for the switch that could take me - overnight - from summer break mode directly into Elul self-perfection mode. I found it. Yishai Ribo's new song, called Seder HaAvodah, brought me to Elul mode. The music, enchanting. The words, tear jerking.

ואם אדם היה יכול לזכור את הפגמים את החסרונות את כל הפשעים את כל העוונות בטח כך היה מונה: אחת. אחת ואחת. אחת ושתיים. אחת ושלוש. אחת וארבע. אחת וחמש. ישר היה מתייחס כי לא יכול היה לשאת את טעם מרירות החטא את הבושה את הפספוס את ההפסד.

*And if a person would remember all of his blemishes, his weaknesses, all the different types of sins, he would for sure start to count, like the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur, One, one and one, one and two, one and three, one and four, one and five, ... Right away, he would despair, ... because he would not be able to bear the bitterness of the sin, the embarrassment, what he missed out on, who he could have been, and the loss.*

And then Yishai Ribo sings:

ואם אדם היה יכול לזכור את החסדים את הטובות את כל הרחמים את כל הישועות בטח כך היה מונה: אחת אחת ואחת אחת ושתיים אחת מאלף אלפי אלפים ורוב ריבוי רבבות ניסים ונפלאות שעשית עמנו ימים ולילות

*And if a person could remember the kindness, the goodness, all the mercy, all the salvations,*

*for sure he would start to count, One, One and one, One and two, One of thousands of thousands, and myriads of miracles and wonders that You did for us, day and night.*

So, there are two ways to count, to make an accounting of the soul. Two ways to judge ourselves, how we have been over the past year. How many things we have done wrong... which equals to how bad we have been. Or, how much we owe. How much we are not deserving.

There are two ways to do Teshuva. Fear and love. When you do Teshuva out of fear, you may erase your sins, but when you repent out of love, all of your sins turn into merits. (Yoma 86:) Why is it that teshuva from fear can't accomplish what teshuva out of love can accomplish? Fear and love are important factors to balance in all of our relationships. When there is too much closeness in a relationship, we feel too heimish, and we can say or do things that don't respect the boundaries of the other person. When the relationship is built only on fear, one cannot enjoy the company of the other. So, both fear and love are important. Why, then, is repentance from love going to turn the sins into mitzvot, while repentance of fear does not achieve this? Why does the repentant get more than one who did not sin to begin with?



In the Idiot's Guide to Peoples Skills, it says the following. *When you apologize, tell the person how much you value him/her. Often people want an apology because they feel that what you did devalued them. People who feel disrespected or slighted are angrier and less prone to receiving your apology. Take care of their feelings and their egos first, so they can hear what you say.*

When you sin, you did not just sin. You showed G-d how, in your mind, you devalued Him. The devaluation needs to be rectified first, before you ask Him forgiveness for the sin. So, first you need Love, you need first to count and recognize all the good that G-d has done for you, before you count your wrongdoings. Otherwise, just asking to wipe away the sin brings with it a reminder of the lack of respect that was involved. When you start to mention all of the good things that another person, or G-d, has done for you, before you say how sorry you are, you have a better chance of getting real forgiveness. And sometimes, this process of love works so effectively, it makes the relationship stronger than what it was before the sin.

When we start to learn how G-d is running our bodies and our minds so perfectly, we begin to realize that we have no idea how "high-maintenance" our lives actually are! The average amount of blood, in adults, is 10 pints. In under a minute, your heart pumps blood to every cell in your body. Sneezes can travel at more than 100 miles an hour. Wrinkles form on fingers and toes when they soak, in order to improve traction. All the computers in the world have about the same computing power as one human brain. G-d knows us, inside and out, in all the spiritual and physical details of

our being. He knows us far better than we know ourselves. So how could we ever wrong Him? How could we ever dare to think that He is not aware of our innermost thoughts, or how we behave, when no one is looking? How foolish! How devaluating! It almost does not even make sense, how we forgot Him!!!

This is not hard to understand when we begin to grasp how our Yetzer Hara works. He has a special spray, that he sprays on us to make us forget how much we are dependent on G-d and how involved G-d is in our lives. Here is an interesting fun-fact I learnt. *Mosquito repellent doesn't repel mosquitoes; it blocks their sensors, so that they do not know you are there!* The Yetzer Hara has this spray that blocks our sensors, so that we do not know that G-d is there!

Here is another fun-fact. Until he died, Christopher Columbus believed that he had landed in Asia, instead of in the "new world". One can live an entire life as a smart person, an achiever, someone who changed the world for the better... and at the same time, live till his last day, not even knowing where he is. Not knowing that he is surrounded by G-d, he is enveloped by G-d. G-d is there, at his side, running his whole life.

So, the first step to Teshuva is to count all the things that we know that G-d did for us, is doing for us and will do for us, realizing that at best, we can know only a microscopic part of it all. Only then can we undo our lack of respect and correct the thoughts and actions that blocked our sensors to know that He is so close.



## 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, הונן הדעת, the blessing of knowledge comes before the blessing of הרוצה בתשובה, 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 מהשבותיו *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 דלתך *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 Helvot. 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, ...* (Eirubin 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)

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 ומשפטיך ושרנו ממצותיך ואתה צדיק על כל הבא עלינו ואנחנו הרשענו , שזה לבנו 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 HaLevot. 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.

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IN LOVING MEMORY OF SONNY AND IRENE GINDI A'H