



Parashat Ki Tavo



English version

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THE ART OF SEEKING HELP

A fundamental of Teshuva, is that you can't do it on your own. Your Yetzer Hara is much, stronger than you. Period. אלמלי הקב"ה עוזרו אינו יכול לו. (Kiddushin 30b) The amount that you damaged through sin, you can never fix, alone. Period.

If we pray, learn Torah, do Mitzvoth, G-d will help us, and we can make things better. The Sefardi Selihot is comprised of 12 prayers that are all constructed in accordance with the Aleph Bet, because we destroyed the worlds that G-d created using His Holy Language, with the Aleph Bet. We say the Aleph Bet prayer twelve times, (רחמנא, אנשי, אמונה, תמהנו, אל תעש עמנו כלה, וידוי, אשמנו מכל עם, אלקינו שבשמים, עננו אבינו, אדון הסליחות, עשה למען one for each month, (אמיתך, לדוד אליך, אליך יקוק נשאתי עיני, Why is the Aleph Bet behind all our Selichot prayers?)

Using the Aleph Bet, G-d created an uncomplete world, a physical world waiting for us to infuse it with spirituality and purpose. This is the meaning of the Shabbat, to infuse spirituality into the six days of Creation. אֲשֶׁר-בָּרָא אֱלֹקִים לַעֲשׂוֹת, a world that G-d created, for us to give it an uplifting meaning. When you sinned, you destroyed the world that G-d was waiting for you to build. Even if you did Teshuva for the sin, the worlds that you could have built are gone. Life is too short to live without meaning, and how much of life has already passed? How can you fix those worlds? This explains why, if a person does Teshuva, alone, and does not learn Torah, he will not be forgiven. (see Onkelos ונקה לא ינקה) Because only through

learning Torah, the blueprint of the world, can you build new worlds.

We say the Thirteen Attributes in selichot five times, for forgiveness for transgressing the 5 books of the Torah. We say אֵל-גָּוֹ שְׁמֵעָה אֵל-גָּוֹ סֵלֶחָה אֵל-גָּוֹ תְּקַשִּׁיבָה וְעֲשֵׂה אֱלֹהֵינוּ שְׁמֵעָה. This acronym stands for, ש"ס"ה, which is asking G-d for forgiveness of the 365 days of the year. Also, we are asking for forgiveness for the sins for which we deserved the four death penalties of Beit Din. שמעה – שריפה, סלחה-סקילה, הקשיבה- הרג, ועשה- והנק. The prayers that we have are the path we use to turn to G-d and say, **HELP US DO TESHUVA!** Help us change! Help us fix what we have damaged!

One of the most important skill-sets in life is to know what you can do yourself and what you cannot. What you need to delegate to others and forget about, what you can handle on your own, what you can pay others to do for you, those things that they can do better than you. This is the lesson that Moshe gave to the Jews in this week's parasha. Immediately after all the curses of the Parasha, Moshe says something unclear. וְלֹא-יָנִמוּ וְקִנְיָן לָבָם לֵב. *And YKVK did not give you a heart to know, and eyes to see, and ears to hear, until this day.* The Midrash explains this rebuke of Moshe referring to the following: When the Jews received the Torah at Mt. Sinai, and said, נעשה ונשמע, we will do and we will listen, G-d said, מִי-יָנִמוּ וְהִיָּה לְבָבָם זֶה לָבָם לִירְאָה אֵתִי וְלִשְׁמֹר אֶת-כָּל-מִצְוֹתַי כָּל-הַיָּמִים לְמַעַן יִטַּב לָבָם וְלִבְנֵיהֶם לְעַלְמָם: *Who will give, that they would fear Me in their heart, and keep all My Mitzvoth, all the days,*

in order that it will be good to them, and to their sons, forever. At that crucial moment of history, the highest level humanity ever reached, the level of Naaseh Venishma, G-d was hoping that we, the Jewish people, would have asked G-d, "Master of the World! You should be the one to give us, to grant us that our hearts forever fear you!" That is why Moshe said, when he rebuked them, that only now, after forty years, you realize that if only you would have asked G-d for His help in fearing Him, how different things would be. (Devarim Rabbah 7 10)

The Talmud tells us (Avodah Zara 5a) that for their not asking G-d for help to be more G-d-fearing, G-d called the Jews כפויי טובה, UNGRATEFUL. Tosefot explains why. The reason why the Jews did not turn to G-d to ask to be G-d-fearing was because they did not want to be indebted; they wanted to be religious, Ultra-Orthodox Jews, Torah Jews, on their own. And that was held against them. Why?

R' Dessler explains this with a great psychological insight. Not being a taker, being only a giver, is only a good thing, if you don't take, because you want to give. But so many times in life, people do not want to take, just because they do not want to have to say thank you! They don't want to have to owe any gratitude to others, as if being grateful, saying thank you, being dependent on G-d, and others when we need them, is a bad thing. This explains why the parasha begins talking about Bikurim, the gratitude for the first of the crop, as gratitude is what makes us happy people, gratitude is the expression of dependency on others, and that we are human. G-d commands us to be grateful to those who have done good to us, for the good that they have done for us, despite all the pain and

suffering they also caused us! לא־תתעב מִצָּרִי כִּי־גֵר הָיִיתָ בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם. Even to an Egyptian who enslaved you, you have to be thankful for his hosting all the years he did, until he enslaved you! Why? Because gratitude, recognizing that you are human, and that you are dependent, are values the Torah wants us to live by.

You can only do what you can, and that is all. But G-d is waiting there, so close to you, כִּי־קְרוֹב אֵלָיךְ הִדְבָּר מְאֹד בְּפִיךָ וּבְלִבְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ. He is not just close, He is VERY close, closer than you can possibly imagine. And He is standing right there, with His Right Hand outstretched to accept those who are returning to the right path. יָמִינְךָ פְּשׁוּטָה לְקַבֵּל שׁוֹבִים. He knows that this battle with the Yetzer Hara is so hard that most people of the world give up on fearing Him, and that is why He is so forgiving. That is what it means, when it says כִּי־עֲמֻמָּה הִסְלִיחָה לְמַעַן תִּירָא. Because with You is the forgiveness, in order that You will be feared.

So, we turn to G-d and make our plea, יִהְיֶה אֱלֹהֵינוּ לִפְנֵי פְּשָׁעֵינוּ, בכבד ראש לכפר על פשעים, embarrassed that we did not live up to who we could have been. After all the faith that G-d had in us, we turned Him down ... and that humbling thought has the power to make G-d willing to forgive all of our sins.

P.S. Lately, I barely have time to write. No time for selfie steps, no time for Q and A on Effective Learning Tools. But I turned to G-d each time, and asked Him, G-d! I beg you! Help me put out another article, even if it is not perfect, even if I can't reach as many people as I would have wanted to. But if it could reach the heart of just one reader, I am going to try to do what I can, and write from my heart. Please, G-d! Help me to give this article the impact that it needs, because I can't do it alone!

GO BIG OR GO HOME

We have a mitzvah to be happy with all the good that G-d gives us. ושמחת בכל הטוב אשר נתן לך ה'.

אלקיך. I always wondered why people who have more don't seem to be happier people.



My Rebbi taught me the following lesson. The world is split into two. People who are glad, and people who are sad. And the difference between the two is that the glad people focus on what they have. And the sad people are focusing on what they do not have. Half empty or half full.

This week's Parasha splits the world into another two. People who are frustrated and people who are satisfied. The difference between the two, is that the people who are frustrated, believe that their efforts decide what they will have, or what they won't have. As it says *עצביהם כסף וזהב מעשה ידי אדם*. The frustration (עצבים) is the result of the belief that gold and silver is the fruit of man's labor. (This is an original twist on the words.) And the people who are happy with what they have are those who realize that all the good they have is from G-d, *ושמחת בכל הטוב אשר נתן לך ה' אלקיך*, And you will rejoice with all the good. How? By realizing that G-d gave it to you (Roshei Besamim).

I met a close friend last week at the Waldorf Astoria in Jerusalem. I asked him what's doing. He said to me, You gotta hear what R' Loichter said in his schmooze last week.

”חרטה”, Regret, is not about feeling bad about the terrible things you've done. *חרטה*, Regret, is realizing how great you could have been.”

In Elul, we could split the Yeshiva world into two: people who utilize Elul as a time to feel bad over all the sins done throughout the year, and people who utilize Elul as a time to think about the great Jew I could have been. The difference is how you look at yourself when you are about to start a New Year. Are you looking forward to realizing your potential, or are you looking at yourself as an object of contempt? This may be why it is inappropriate to mention sins on Rosh Hashana. Because we are in the making of the new you for the new year. We don't need objects of contempt for the new year. We need people who realize their potential.

Napoleon Hill, in his classic book, *Think and Grow Rich*, first published in 1937 and the forefather of most American self-help thought, gives us a concept that the way you think decides your fate. That rich people think like rich people, while poor people think like poor people. But Napoleon was preceded by our Talmud. *Rava told Rabah, son of Mari, From where is this wisdom of the adage, that riches go after the rich, and that poverty goes after the poor? He said to him that we see in our Mishnah, that when the rich brought their Bikurim fruits, their first fruits of the season, to the Kohen, they brought them in baskets of gold and silver, while the poor brought their Bikurim in woven baskets. After giving the basket and fruits to the Kohen, the rich would take their baskets back home, while the poor, who had to scrape together what little they had to purchase the woven baskets, needed to leave their baskets with the Kohen in Yerushalayim.*

Napoleon writes that the first thing you need in order to become rich is to tap into your dreams and your desire. You need to think big to make it big. All self-made millionaires took that route. And it can't just be a desire. It's got to be a burning desire. You need to have your heart bleed for it.

I always teach my students that all the secrets of the self-made millionaire are the secrets of the self-made Talmid Chacham, or the self-made Tzaddik. There are only three books that are open on Rosh Hashanah. Tzaddik, Rasha, and the undecided are suspended for judgement on Yom Kippur. If you want to be with the Tzaddikim, you need to think big. Like they say in business “Go big, or go home.” Whatever you decide to do in life, do it par excellence. There is no place for the middle sized businesses. There is no book for the complacent Orthodox. A burning desire is the only way you can reach your potential next year, the only way you can make it into the book of Tzaddikim.

So, the first step in Elul is to realize who we really could be. To develop a desire for the “me of my dreams”. And the next step is to focus on that desire long enough, until your desire becomes a



burning desire. Because there are only two types of people in the world. Those who have a burning

desire, and those whose desire burnt out.

THE CHAFETZ CHAIM'S FEAR

I wanted to test-drive this article with a mother of children; at first, she said she didn't want to hear anything about it. But, in the end, she was happy she listened...

I started with the Rambam. השמחה שישמה אדם בעשיית המצוה ובאהבת הא-ל שצוה בהן עבודה גדולה היא וכל המונע עצמו משמחה זו ראוי להפרע ממנו שנאמר תחת אשר לא עבדת את ה' אלקיך בשמחה ובטוב לבב The happiness with which a person performs a Mitzvah and his love of G-d Who commanded it, is a great "avoda", G-d's service. Anyone who refrains from this delight is to be punished! Our Parasha gives the reason for punishments; *Because you did not serve YHVH, your G-d, with happiness and a good heart* (Lulav 8;15). For getting the Mitzvah over with, and off our "to-do" list (see Maggid Mishna).

The Chafetz Chaim's grandson said that his grandfather was not as worried about punishment for his sins as he was about punishment for not having performed Mitzvoth with the love, joy and passion that they deserve.

"No! Stop! I learnt in seminary; but now my husband is learning full time. I am the breadwinner, nurse, wife, housecleaner, with another zillion roles, chores, and responsibilities! I don't have time to daven and learn as I did in sem. Punished for not doing mitzvoth with my whole heart? My husband and kids can learn and pray with a whole heart! I don't have the time or energy!"

I said to her, "Hashem will not punish you for not learning or praying with your whole heart, because that is not your Tafkaid- your spiritual mission at this stage in life. Your Tafkaid is to be the best mother you can be! Changing a diaper is no less service of G-d than the Kohen Gadol offering Ketoret on Yom Kippur! (This is something I was taught by R Yehuda Ades, Shlita). Do you feel joy when you change a diaper? Do you feel like a

zillion dollars when you help your husband and your kids go out to learn? That is your Olam Haba!

I remember the time when a yeshiva boy came to me for help. Once, a kid offered him drugs. He got hooked, became a dealer. At the age 17, he was in yeshiva in Israel. He came to me after the yeshiva discovered his secret. He opened up to me. He hates himself. He hates his parents. He hates life. He feels that G-d is going to punish him for all he has done wrong. I listened and listened. Then I asked him, what do you think is the worst thing you ever did, that you will be punished for?

He said "A". I said, no. "B" – Nope. "C"? Nope. Still worse. He asked me what gets the biggest punishment. I said – you never enjoyed the life that G-d gives you. תחת אשר לא עבדת את ה' אלוקיך בשמחה ובטוב לבב מרב כל He was quiet. For a long time. He asked me, "G-d wants me to enjoy life? More than punishing me for sinning, He will punish me for not being happy, appreciative and serving Him?" I said, that's right. He was quiet. He decided to go to a yeshiva that deals with dealers, and he changed his life. Completely.

We all want to serve G-d with our whole heart, to be great men and women. Probably, for a frum Jew, the hardest question to answer today is, Are you happy to be frum? Yes or No. Frum is not just being part of a system of rules and regulations that you were brought up with. Are you happy to have to get up early enough to pray and say Shema with all your heart? Happy to spend fortunes on your kids' tuition? To be limited on the internet? To give tzeddaka, to say Birkat Hamazon, put on Tefillin, wear Tzitzit? To keep Shabbat? To stay away from the fun and luxury this world has to offer and learn Torah instead? Happy with all that? Yes, or no?

The truth is that this is not one time, yes or no question. It is what you face each time Judaism



conflicts with your lifestyle. Each time it challenges your entire belief system. A man facing a very difficult dilemma asked me for advice. I do not wish such a problem on my worst enemy. “My 19-year-old son told me that he does not want to keep Shabbat.” That is a rough one!! Many parents faced with that nightmare, bark back, “Shabbos!!!??? Mechalel Shabbat?!!! Skilah, Karet! I will take you out of my will!!!” I do not blame them; it’s a scenario that can bring on a heart attack, and I do not wish it on my worst enemy.

Barking, of course, does not work. I believe the response should be, “It pains me greatly to hear that my child, who I love so much, is going to miss out on G-d’s biggest gift!!! Shabbat is the greatest thing in my life!!!” What G-d cares most about is our love in serving Him, our love and joy for Shabbat, more than Shabbat, itself. And the kids see that in their parents. They feel it. They smell it. They hear it. And this is the make-it or break-it point. Lots of talking, convincing, manipulating, doesn’t help. Kids don’t learn from words. They are much more tuned in to the other five senses: what they see, feel, smell and taste. Do you give them the taste of Shabbat? Do they smell spirituality in your home, in the simchas you make? Do they feel your love for your religion, or only your sacrifice for it?

Love of the mitzvah is part of the Mitzvah. It is the key ingredient, and that is why the lack of it calls for punishment. Excitement, enthusiasm are the sign that you want Hashem as your G-d. It’s all about your happiness, doing the Mitzvah. The Arizal learnt from the end of this passuk, מרב כל, that the Mitzvah’s worth in your eyes and how bad you feel on missing out when not able to do the Mitzvah is supposed to be of greater value than all the money in the world!

Close to when the Digital Age began, a new “Judaism” started to take a powerful form. It is The Zombie Jewish. The Army of the Dead. Look into their eye, when they have to keep the 613, and you see something dark and distant. Something is

wrong. It’s scary. Much is being said about hypocrisy in the frum world. Why is there so much hypocrisy? Why so much inconsistency? Why can’t we enjoy the religion that we are giving up so much for? This is a question that bothers me to no end. Because it pains G-d to no end.

The Baal Shem Tov would say that the only way to get out of any problem you have in life is through simcha, כי בשמחה תצאון. Hidden in this passuk, are three secrets for how we can all tap into the love of the Mitzvah. לֹא-עֲבַדְתָּ אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּשִׂמְחָה לְכָב מְרַב כָּל יוֹמְךָ The first is, *know who you are serving*. People forget to focus on Who they are serving, when serving G-d. As long as you are coming from a self-centered motive, you can never find serenity because you are not tapping into your spiritual purpose. Once, someone sent the Lubavitcher Rebbe a letter. “I have no parnassah. I have no shalom bayit. I have no motivation to learn, pray or do kindness. I can’t seem to find my life’s purpose. I would appreciate if the Rebbe would bless me and let me know what I am doing wrong.” When he opened the reply, he saw that the Rebbe had sent him back the same letter, but he circled the first letter – I – of every sentence, in red. The problem is that “I” is the beginning of every statement in your life. So often, G-d offers us an opportunity to serve Him. We need to tap into our inner joy for being given that particular opportunity, even if it is not exactly what *we* want. We cannot compare our service to that of other people, because G-d gives each person something that is “tailor-made”, just for him. Comparing our service to others is not serving G-d.

The next lesson in this passuk is, YHVH – G-d’s Attribute of Mercy – is your G-d. Elokim is G-d’s Attribute of Judgement. The only way you can learn to love G-d and serve Him with passion is if you recognize that all the hard things in life, all the Judgement, come from G-d’s Mercy. This recognition is a “make-it or break-it”, to be the Happy-to-Be-Frum Jew.

And the last lesson is, מרב כל. *A lot of everything*. To serve G-d with happiness, we need



to believe that we have everything we need. Wanting more is endless. You will never have everything in this world. People who are able to serve G-d with love are those who say, if I do not have something, G-d does not want me to have it.

And, believe it or not, this is what Mashiach is waiting for. For us to learn to enjoy doing the Mitzvoth. The letters of משיח are the same letters as the word שמח! Just flipped around!

G-D'S PROMISE

In self-help, we are taught that what makes people move, change, become motivated, is from one of two things: either running away from pain, or running towards pleasure. If we would like to discover how this expresses itself in our observance of Judaism, it can translate into the belief that G-d offers reward for good deeds and punishes for sin. When you believe this, that G-d rewards the righteous and that the sinners suffer, it is easier to stay motivated to keep Mitzvoth and refrain from Averot. The problem, the reason why this is confusing, is because in the world of העלם, G-d allows the illusion that the righteous suffer and the mirage that sinners get away with it.

We all want G-d to grant us a good year. And G-d wants us to give Him a good year, as well, by making Him King. You cannot expect G-d to be good to you, if you do not want to keep your side of the “bargain”. As Orthodox Jews, we all believe in reward and punishment. We believe that G-d will pay us for our good deeds, and that our sins have a price tag. But unfortunately, this is mostly a belief that is reflected upon in the past or present. I realized that I never reflect on this belief when I plan my future. That if I daven with more heart, G-d may answer my prayers. That if I learn without interruption, I may have more success in financing my family. And that if I give more Tzedakah and do more Chessed, G-d will open the gates of Heaven and allow His blessings to pour into my life.

Parashat Ki Tavo has a fundamental lesson interlaced throughout the Parasha. You want good in life, in this world and the next? Invest in G-d. Do more mitzvoth. Less sins. More Torah.

For example. The Midrash tells us, in the beginning of the Parasha, how powerful a Mitzvah can be. That *someone who does a Mitzvah, has more of a right to have his request granted of G-d than someone who is dealing with a king. When dealing with a king, you can offer him a fortune, just to get in to see him; and you have no way of knowing if he will do as you request. But G-d is not that way. A person goes down to his field and sees a first fig of the crop, or the first cluster of the crop and puts it in his basket. And he comes and stands in the Temple and says,* “השקיפה ממעון קדשך מן השמים וברך את-עמך את-ישראל ואת האדמה אשר נתתה לנו כפאשר נשבעת לאבותינו ארץ זבת חלב ודבש: *G-d, Gaze down from your holy dwelling and bless Your nation, Yisrael, and the land that you gave to us, as you swore to our forefathers, a land flowing with milk and honey.* The Midrash adds that the person offering Bikurim now says, *I am not going to leave this spot, until You do all that I need!*

The right the man has to ask, to demand directly of G-d is something Resh Lakish learns from the adjacent words of the following passuk. יקום אל ה' מצינו לעשות את-החקים האלה ואת-המשפטים יקום אל ה' מצינו לעשות את-החקים האלה ואת-המשפטים ... “*This day Hashem commanded you to do*”. Resh Lakish explains the flow of pesukim, that a Heavenly voice would go out and say “*You will have again, next year.*”

What does this mean? I have the power, to decide my fate through my deeds? Having a good life is up to me? I am in control of my destiny, my future, the outcome? We pray to Hashem while bringing the Bikurim, השקיפה ממעון קדשך מן השמים וברך את-עמך את-ישראל ואת האדמה אשר נתתה לנו from Your holy dwelling, from the Heavens, and bless Your Jewish Nation and the Land You gave



us. Rashi says on this, that the person bringing the Bikurim is saying, עשינו מה שגזרת עלינו, עשה אתה מה אם בחקתי תלכו ונתתי שעליך לעשות, שאמרת (ויקרא כו, ג) אגשמיכם בעתם: We did what you have decreed us to do; now, do Your part, as it says, “If you go in my statutes, I will give your rain in its time”.

R Alexandri writes that usually, the word השקיפה refers to G-d gazing in a way that brings suffering. וישקוף יקנול אל-מתנה מצרים בעמוד אש וענן ויהם את מתנה מצרים: וישקוף על פני סדם ועמרה ועל כל פני ארץ הכפך Every time there is the root שקף, it implies something bad, negative. But in the case of the Bikurim, the word השקיפה is an exception, and it brings blessings! After the Bikurim process, after the tithing, after the kindness to the Kohen and to the poor, the evil judgement of שקף is switched to Mercy. And not only that! Usually, our deeds are not enough to make us deserving of goodness, for they are not only leshem Shamayim – they can be observed because of ulterior motives. As it says, לך ה' הצדקה ולנו בושט הפנים To You, Hashem, is righteousness, and to us is embarrassment. (See Shemot Rabbah Ki Tisah 41) The Shem Mishmuel writes that giving charity will connect one to G-d and draw blessing from G-d more than most Mitzvot will, because G-d is with the poor and downtrodden, and He uses them for the great Tafkaidim, as it says ואני את דכא אשכון. (See Sh. Mish' Vayigash, Sotah 5a, Yeshaya 57 15)

Regarding Torah learning, as well. Tremendous blessing is bestowed in financing a family, when one is constantly watchful not to disturb his set times of Torah study. As it says, וראו עליה כל-הברכות

THE ELUL THAT VIBRATED IN MY POCKET

Last week my phone vibrated, and that phone call shook me up to the core. ” Hi. Rabbi Farhi, I need your help. This year’s Elul is all over the place. I am just too busy, lately, helping out at home, and it is nothing like the Eluls of past years. I am not making it for Selihot. I am not able to get to Seder at 9. My mind wanders during Elul prayers, as if its Purim. I failed the first two weeks of Elul. And, if I missed the first part of Elul, I know that I do not

האלה והשיגה כי תשמע בקול יקנול אלהיך. And all these blessings will chase after you, and they will reach you, when you listen to the Voice of YHVH, your G-d.(Devarim 28 2) The Seforno explains this to mean that even without your running after the blessings, they will chase after you, even without your Hishtadlut. But, this is only when you listen to the voice of G-d, and the Seforno explains this to mean, when you make your Torah study your primary occupation, and your work, secondary. As we see in the times of the second temple, people were able to have just a Kazayit of food and feel satiated. (See Yoma 39a) Because wealth, in Judaism, does not mean you will have more. Wealth, in Judaism, means you will need less.

Do you believe this? That if you leave your learning, your seder, before time is up, if you answer a phone call that you do not need to answer, you will have to work harder to support your family, for you will be working without G-d’s blessings? These are G-d’s promises to you, in this week’s parasha.

So, before you map out who you want to be and what you want to do for the next year, remember: When you give tzedakah, when you do chessed, you are in control of your destiny, and you can change your bad decree to a good one. When you learn uninterruptedly, you will have less unexpected expenses, and you will be granted Divine Assistance. With these two, you have a promise from G-d that you will have a beautiful year.

have a streak of forty days of teshuva! Please help!”

The truth is, that Elul is not about going berserk. It is about awareness of the severity of sin, and awareness of the opportunity to get close to G-d. Awareness that we all need to do Teshuva, in whatever way possible. That’s all.

Just as I was putting together my thoughts for this article, something amazing happened. As Daf



Hayomi moves to Massechet Chagigah, I randomly opened the Tractate, and the first words my eyes saw almost made them fall out of their sockets. Says Rabbi Chanina, son of Papa, ‘Anyone who does something that is forbidden, and regrets that he sinned, is immediately forgiven! As it says, *They have not feared Me*. But if they fear me after they sinned and they repent, they will be forgiven immediately!’ (Chagigah 5a) Why? Why if you realize or if you are aware of what you did, does G-d forgive? How does awareness help?

This week’s Parasha tells us about the Mitzvah of Viduy on Bikkurim. (Megillah 20b) Viduy is the proclamation that you did not leave tithes of your fruits back home, and you have properly dealt with Masser and Terumah. We know of another Viduy. The Viduy when someone bangs a fist on his heart and admits misbehaving. What is the connection between the two Viduys? Why are they both called Viduy? One is saying ‘I was responsible’, and the other is saying that I was not. It seems to be a contradiction.

To explain this, allow me first to introduce you to a simple coaching tool I have found very useful. One of the biggest obstacles to tackle in relationship coaching is abuse. The greatest example is verbal abuse. And the verbal abuse that does the most damage is from a person who does not realize that he/she is abusing. And the closer the abuser is to you, the more the abuser is important in your eyes, the deeper and more serious the damage. This is because, in this situation, your “guard” is down. You let the comment penetrate, or you allow the close person to raise his voice to you. By not standing up for yourself, you accept the abuse, telling your subconscious that you deserve derogatory comments. The closest person to you is yourself, and you may not be aware of the fact that you, yourself, are guilty of verbal abuse – to yourself! In order for a coach or therapist to help a person, the first first aid is to help him stand up to abuse from himself or from those whom he respects. This does not mean to attack in return, but, as Bibi Netanyahu said to the UN, “We have a red line, and we will

not let anyone pass it”. A person must **have** a red line and know where it is. So, how do we stop the abuser? Let us take, for example, a scenario where someone you love or respect is raising his voice or screaming at you. Just because you love and respect your loved ones, your partner, boss or sibling, it does not mean you can’t stand up for yourself. The problem is that most people do not know what to say, without making a counter attack, answering in the same tone. I will now reveal the secret-self-defense weapon, the four questions that you can ask. It does not matter how the person responds. Just ask the questions, and he will stop abusing. Guaranteed. One condition. You need to be calm and firm. And, the wording needs to be exact.

The first question is, “**Do you realize** that you are shouting at me?” or “**Are you aware** that you are insulting me by talking negatively about an important person or people in my life?” Whether the person answers yes or no, it does not matter. Either way, he is *now* aware. The reason why most people do wrong is because they are not *aware* of what they are doing. The main question is *Are you aware....*, or *Do you realize...*

The reason why the wording needs to be exact is because AWARE and REALIZE are hypnotic words. Power Words. You can hypnotize someone, persuade someone, sell something to someone by using these two powerful power words. Are you aware of how much power you have just by inserting the word AWARE into questions? I am sure you realize now. If the person continues to scream, wait a little and then ask ...

Question 2... *Are you able to stop screaming at me?* Again, it does not make a difference what they answer to that question. The main thing is that you have brought awareness, and that it could be the person is screaming at you just because he can’t stop screaming, not because you deserve to be screamed at. And, many times, the one who is screaming really, truly can’t stop. And if he continues to scream you are now ready for..

Step 3. *If you can’t stop, I will have*



to... You need to think what you can use as a “threat”; it has to be something that the person does not want you to do and something that you will not regret. ... *I will have to close the phone. ... I will have to end this conversation.* This lets the person *know, realize* and be *aware*, that he has reached your “Red Line”. And if he continues..

Step 4. Stand up for yourself and do what you said you were going to do. Show that you mean business, and *that you have a red line.* Then, the person realizes that he is dealing with a person, not a *shmattah.*

All this has to do with *awareness.* Now, back to Elul. The sinner is generally not aware of the same four things. He is not aware that he is sinning. Or, he is not aware that he can't stop, and needs to learn how to stop. Or, he is not aware what the punishment is. Or, he is not aware that G-d is serious about reward/punishment.

A HAPPY ELUL

Teshuva is a happy thing. If you are doing Teshuva and you are not happy, you are not really cashing in on all your benefits. Happiness is what changes the evil decree of sin. Happiness is what brings upon you G-d's mercy.

This is found in Rabbenu Bachye in this weeks parasha, at the end of the prayer of the one who brings his Bikurim to the Bet Hamikdash. *שְׁמַעְתִּי בְּקוֹלִי יְיָ אֱלֹהֵי עֲשֵׂיתִי כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתָנִי מִמֶּנִּי: I listened to what Hashem, my G-d, said; I did all that You commanded me.* (Devarim 26) Rabbenu Bachye writes on these words: *I listened to the voice of Hashem my G-d, by bringing the Bikurim, to the Bet Hamikdash. I did all that You commanded me, that I was happy and I made others happy.*

How do our Rabbis infer that the words *I did all that You commanded me* means that I was happy and I made others happy? The answer is found in the word Kol, *all*, as we find it elsewhere meaning happiness. *ושמחה בכל הטוב.* And you shall be happy with *all* the good. (Rabbenu Bachye) The secret to this happiness, the secret to making others happy,

Viduy, is similar to the word Vadai, *for sure.* Clarity. It is clear to me that there are no tithes at home. It is clear to me that I have sinned. I am aware. I realize. What a big word. To realize. Elul is about awareness. Elul is to realize what we are doing. And the person who realizes and is aware of what the Day of Judgment implies is shaking in his pants (and not because his phone is on vibrate). For others, it takes forty days to become aware, but that is also fine. That bachur who called me on the phone is already aware only two weeks into Elul, and I am jealous.

Our Rabbis teach, that the main word in Viduy is the word Aval. *אבל* אנהנו ואבותינו הטאנו. That word has a synonym, *אלא* or *אמת*. The word *אלא* means that what was said until now was wrong. Now, I am aware of the truth. The responsible person is the one who realizes and is aware, and that is the connection between the two Viduys. If we aware of this, we may realize what Elul is all about.

is hidden in the word “Kol”. When you realize that *all* you have is all that you are supposed to have, because G-d is G-d and you are just human, you can begin to be happy.

And then, Rabbenu Bachye says the most amazing thing. The passuk continues *השקיפה ממעון קדשך מן השמים וברך את-עמך את-ישראל* (Devarim 26 15) *Look down from the holy place in Heaven called Maon- the place where happiness is from, and bless Your nation, Yisrael.* Rabbenu Bachye asks, isn't the word *השקיפה* usually linked to G-d's Attribute of Judgement, as we find *ויהי באשמת ה' ה' יקרא אל-מתנה מצרים... וישקף על-פני סדום ונצמרה?* Why, over here, does it link with G-d's Attribute of Mercy?

The answer is that when someone is happy, he accesses the Attribute of G-d of mercy, as he is connected to Maon, a different part of Heaven. R' Nachman from Breslov is quoted as having said that happiness nullifies and prevents decrees from being enacted upon a person. This is seen in the Megilla. After having invited King Achashverosh



and Haman to a special, festive meal, Esther was particular to make a second party, and only then did she make her accusation against Haman. Why should she not have spoken out against him in the first instance? Why was it necessary to have a second party?

At the first party, Haman was happy, and when someone is happy, suffering and evil decrees do not fall upon him. This is true even in regard to a Rasha. Once Haman became depressed for having suffered the disgrace of leading Mordechai around the city on the King's horse, while Mordechai was wearing the Kings clothes – this put Haman in a position that made him vulnerable to his fall. Happiness is the way to change one Attribute of G-d to another.

So how am I supposed to be happy in Elul, when I am saying how wrong I was all year long?

HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YOU

A 50+ year old brother and sister asked me to help them with their Hebrew. That is what I do; helping people improve their prayer and learning, communicating with G-d, on every level possible. Their elderly father asked to speak to me. With a strong Syrian accent, he said, “Rabbi, you like G-d. G-d teaches Torah. המלמד תורה לעמו ישראל. You teach Torah. You like G-d.”

I cried. This is what our religion is about, and the power of the 13 Attributes of Mercy. To be G-d-like. As we are commanded in this week's parasha וְהִלַּכְתָּ בְּדַרְכֵי יְהוָה *And, you shall go in His ways.* (Devarim 28; 10) G-d has so many ways. He is holy, merciful, patient, giving, loving, sustaining, providing... and He teaches us Torah. I just did not realize that teaching Torah is being G-dly.

Another thing I realized about being G-d-like. G-d is unique. Being G-dly means to be unique. He is not persuaded by others, and He does not do things because that's the trend. Being G-dly, is being able to be the authentic **you**, because there is no one else with your unique qualities.

This is something that is so important, so crucial for relationships. The words “I was wrong” when you make a mistake, have so much value. People shy away from admitting they were wrong, because it brings them down from their place of inflated ego, to a place of being human. This is the ultimate test of Rosh Hashana, how humble you really are, how bent over are you, how similar you are to the Shofar, with its bent over shape. But this is what Teshuva is really about, recognizing that you are just a human, and humans make mistakes, and only G-d can help you become better.

How great it is to become more humble, more human? How much calmer would that make us? How much more happy would we be, if would stop thinking that we are anything more than that?

Are you religious because the people around you are religious? Haran did not survive the fire that Avraham HaIvri survived, because Judaism is about being religious because that is **you**. Haran just followed Avraham, but on his own, he was not willing to give up his life for G-d. Judaism is being Haivri, from ‘the other side’. The whole world is on one side, and you are on the other. If you are religious only because you are surrounded by religious people, your commitment to religion is weak. Once you are alone, you will not be as religious. Being G-d-like is, no matter if you are alone, no matter if no one knows or sees, the holy spirit inside you is your compass.

This is the unique blessing of this week's parasha, and the key to unlocking the power hidden in Rosh Hashana. וַיִּתְּנָהּ יְהוָה לְרֹאשׁ וְלֹא לְזָנָב *And YKVK will make you a “head”, not a “tail”.* On Rosh Hashana night, when we eat the head of the fish, we pray to G-d this powerful prayer ... יְהִי רִצּוֹן יְהוָה שֶׁנִּשְׁנֵיהָ לְרֹאשׁ וְלֹא לְזָנָב *May it be the will... that we be like the head and not the tail.*



you to observe these laws and statutes, and you shall guard and perform them with all of your heart and all of your soul. What? G-d gave them the Torah 40 years before! Why “Today”? Rashi answers that every day it shall be, in your eyes, as if today He made a covenant with you.

Renewal is the secret. Rosh Hashana is a new world, a new life. Today is not the tail of yesterday. This is why men go to the Mikveh before Rosh Hashana, as it is symbolic of being reborn. Rosh Hashana means you are getting another chance to rebuild your goals and tap into your inner genius. Being G-dly is following G-d’s example of creating the world anew by starting your own life, anew. Dare to be you, to be your own version of Nachson Ben Amindav, who walked right into Sea, not looking at what anyone else was doing. This is the gene that brought about King David. Being the unique you, is the secret of King David, and the secret of the zealotry of Pinchas a.k.a. Eliyahu Hanavi who ignored everyone and did what his heart told him was his unique life purpose. Let us remember this as we pray for Mashiach on Rosh Hashana *יְבוֹן וְאַלְיָהוּ אֲנִי שׂוֹלֵה*. Mashiach will come when each one focuses on his/ her unique mission

PREPARING FOR ROSH HA’SHANAH

I once overheard a conversation that echoes in my ears every year around this season. A young son of a rabbi who was looking to become wealthy asked one of his father’s wealthy congregants how he can get rich. “It only takes one day a year,” the man answered, “but you have to do it right. Rosh HaShanah is the day when G-d decides how much money you are going to make that year. I made all my money on that day while I was in shul.”

Both the questioner and I were shocked by this powerful statement – especially from someone who makes a few million a year. I realized, though, that the wealthy congregant was not referring only to the “work” of Rosh HaShanah, but also to his preparations for that day. By the time he reached Rosh HaShanah, he was ready for another year of serving G-d on an entirely new level.

in this world. (see Niddah 13b אין בן דוד בא עד שיכלו כל הנשמות שבגוף)

Selfie steps to starting life anew, and tapping into your unique genius.

1. No one has your portfolio of talents, strengths, weaknesses, personality. Learn to love yourself. You cannot be replaced, and your life cannot be repeated.
2. Take meditative time-outs. What we are today comes from our thoughts of yesterday, and our present thoughts build our life of tomorrow: Our life is the creation of our mind. *The world as we have created it is a process of our thinking. It cannot be changed without changing our thinking. -Albert Einstein*
3. Stop acting as if life is a rehearsal. Live this day as if it were your last. The past is over and gone. The future is not guaranteed.

In the days of Elul, everyone claims that they want to change. Someone said to me recently that a good article or good speech in Elul is one after which you feel your life has changed. I disagree! This definition of change is more or less equivalent to that of the person who walks out of a *Weight Watchers* session, and says he lost 50 pounds in just one hour. People almost never change at lightning speed. An inspiring Elul speech may indeed give someone the desire to change, or provide a new plan for change – but to actually change is an entirely different story.

Change is scary because it involves struggle. It means acknowledging that the way I presently think or feel or perceive is flawed. It means that every day I have to stick to the new commitment that took me only a few moments to make. All this



takes time. Something like forty days. Welcome to Elul!

As Rosh HaShanah approaches, many of us have the unfortunate feeling that “I am not ready yet for the *new me* I want to be for the *new year*.” This can cause us to feel the need to take big steps of change, something like a full court shot or a touchdown throw. When we are pressed for time, we may try to cut corners of the full *teshuvah* process, and miss out on some of the key steps to change.

Overcoming the enemy within

When planning an attack in real war, the generals know that there are certain strategies that work and others that do not. If your Air Force flies high over the enemy, they will be identified and shot down. If, however, you have your planes fly low, they will be less easy to spot, and they will be in a better position to overcome the enemy. Similarly, when we try to make massive change, the negative tendencies built into ourselves see this as an attack, and they know how to counter it. But if it is small change, they do not perceive this as an attack – and even manage to get used to the change.

This approach is implicit in the famous parable in the Midrash which deals with the concept of *teshuvah*, and the foolishness of people who are afraid to escape their sinful habits (*Koheleth Raba* 7). A group of thieves in prison start digging secretly until they are able to tunnel out an escape route. They all escape except for one of the thieves who stays behind. When the prison guard comes around for inspection, and sees how all but one member of the group escaped, he gives the straggler a beating while yelling: Fool! How did you forgo an opportunity to escape and save your life!?

Now, we might ask: Why does the Midrash compare doing *teshuvah* to digging a secret escape tunnel? Why not breaking down the door, picking the lock, or something less demanding?

The answer is that real *teshuvah* is not a frontal attack against our past behavior. Rather, it is a procedure of one small step at a time. We must do it patiently, and *dig* away at our negative priorities and beliefs. This is *teshuvah*. This is change. There is no shortcut or front door.

The fact that we have lots of work ahead of us this Elul should not cause us to feel discouraged. One reason for that is a vitally important insight of the *Mabit* in his *Beit Elokim* (*Shaar HaTeshuvah*, Ch. 12). He notes that there is a major difference between the mitzvah of *teshuvah* and other mitzvot. Take, for example, the mitzvah of *tzitzit*. With strings only on three corners of our garment – instead of four – it is not as if we have fulfilled three-fourths of the mitzvah. We have accomplished nothing. In contrast, if we take only one of the 24 steps of *teshuvah* spelled out in Rabeinu Yonah’s *Sha’arei Teshuvah*, we have fulfilled a part of the mitzvah of *teshuvah*. It’s not “all or nothing.”

Another important insight which can help us this Elul is that of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter (*Ohr Yisrael, Igeret* 8). R’ Yisrael first draws on the Rambam: “Everyone has merits and sins. The person who has a majority of merits is a *tzaddik*, and the person who has a majority of sins is a *rasha* (evildoer). This scale of measurement is not according to the amount of merit or sin. Some sins are very heavy, and just a few of these outweigh a great number of merits. Similarly, certain merits outweigh a much larger number of sins. The weighing is done with G-d’s judgment alone, and only He knows the weight of each merit and sin.” (*Hilchot Teshuvah*, Chapter 3)

Although the Rambam does not tell us how to measure our merits or sins, R’ Yisrael points out that one way to know the weight of a mitzvah or sin is by how hard or easy it is for us to fulfill it or refrain from doing it. The same sin is considered much “weightier” when it would have been easy to refrain from. And the same mitzvah is considered “weightier” when it was hard to fulfill. R’ Yisrael therefore writes that if one is capable of finding



those sins that are actually easier for him to refrain from, and do *teshuvah* on them, this may very well help significantly in lightening the side of sin on the balance scale.

This is very useful information for preparing ourselves for the Day of Judgment. It means, for example, that if we cannot stop speaking *lashon hara* totally, we can at least stop ourselves when it is easy for us to refrain. If we cannot stop ourselves from not learning Torah when it is hard or difficult,

APPRECIATION – THE KEY TO HAPPY LIVING

What does a Jew do when G-d blesses him with a new crop? As described in this week's *parashah*, he brings the first fruits – the *bikurim* – to the *Beit HaMikdash*, and makes the special *viduy* declaration over them. The purpose of this mitzvah is to declare that one is grateful for all the good that he is given by G-d. This is also the reason why the declaration is called *viduy* – a term that usually means *confession*. The *viduy* over the first fruits is a *confession* of gratitude. This whole procedure was done with pomp and ceremony which included a parade with fancy baskets and bulls adorned in gold. The *viduy* itself was recited in a loud voice.

This is not the only place where the Torah *commands us* to show that we are grateful (*makir tovah*). Wise people know that the difference between the happy and the despondent is usually not due to money, pleasure, honor, or the like. Rather, happy people are happy because they know how to appreciate what they have been given. And if their cup appears to be half empty, they know that it's really half full. Even if they have almost no money/pleasure/honor, they feel appreciative to G-d for bringing up the sun each morning. This alone can fill one's heart with happiness. But aside from the benefit a person derives from perceiving the world this way, the Jew is *obligated* by G-d to thank Him for the sun every day in the morning prayers ("ברכת יוצר אור"). As a matter of fact, this is the longest *brachah* we have. Although many people would be more

at least let us learn Torah when it is easier or learn lighter subjects. If we cannot stop ourselves from getting angry every time we are provoked, maybe we can at least eliminate all the times when we are capable of some sort self-control.

And we can rest assured that if we start with that which is easy, then that which is hard will be more easily within our reach.

thankful to G-d for winning the lottery, this is a grave mistake.

If we take a moment to ask ourselves what we need most for survival, we might be inclined to mention money, support, family, friends, house, car, Blackberry, etc. But the *Chovot HaLevovot* helps us see that we are way off base. He makes the following remarkable observation: *What we need most, G-d gives us in the greatest abundance and at the cheapest price – despite the high demand.* The thing we really need most is air. Thus G-d made sure that air is free and freely available. The next most important thing for survival is water. Not surprisingly, water is the second most abundant item on the planet. Third is food – also available in abundance... Just thinking about how much G-d actually supports us should inspire us to be appreciative (and to remember just how much we need Him).

Why do people sometimes avoid feeling appreciation? The answer is that appreciation creates obligation – the obligation to recognize that we are not in power; the obligation to be thankful to G-d, and to obey His every word.

One way to increase our capacity to be appreciative to G-d is to view ourselves as guests in His world. Concerning guests, the Talmud says: *What is the difference between a good guest and a bad one? A good guest says: "Whatever the host made or did was to accommodate me." The bad guest says: "Whatever the host made or did was for himself. I*



am just tagging along” (Berachot 58b). With regard to our visit in this world as well, we have to choose what kind of guest we want to be. Do we want to be a good guest and say: “G-d brought the sun up for me today,” or do we want to be a bad guest in this world and say: “G-d had to bring up the sun anyway. I just happen to be here”?

One of my Rabbis would say that when we wake up in the morning and bless G-d for opening our eyes (through the blessing פוקה עוריים), we need to be thankful to G-d for creating light as well – and all the benefits we get from light. We even need to be thankful to G-d for putting it into the human mind to invent glasses. Indeed, the glasses sitting right on our nose can serve as a reminder of all these kindnesses. It seems, by the way, that Moshe Rabbeinu himself made use of a “built-in” reminder to keep G-d’s kindness to him in the forefront of his mind. We see this in his reluctance to accept G-d’s request that he lead the Jews out of Egyptian slavery. Moshe emphasized that his lisp would prevent him from doing the job effectively. But why, we wonder, didn’t Moshe ask G-d to cure the lisp? The explanation seems to be that Moshe did not want to ever forget his gratitude to G-d for saving his life as a baby when Pharaoh put him to the test. The Midrash tells us that a dish of gold and a dish of coals were put in front of the baby Moshe. Had he reached for the gold, this would have “clinched” the stargazers’ case that Moshe was destined to be the redeemer of the Jews – and Pharaoh would thus have put him to death. But G-d

I LOVE (THAT) NEW YORK(ER)

I was coaching someone in his office in New York. He said that business has been slow for the last four years. He has not been learning Torah or praying in Minyan for a while. He has six kids and feels like a bad father, and “harmony at home” turned into something more like rock music. I asked him what bothered him the most out of the three problems. When he answered me, he offered his own take on the root of his troubles: religion. That was the reason for all three problems. He explained himself. He said that recently he had sinned a lot; he has become less spiritual, and he

saved his life by having an angel push his hand away from the gold, and over to the coals. The baby Moshe grabbed some coal, and put it to his lips, causing himself a permanent lisp. Moshe wanted this lisp to remain with him in order to always remember this miracle, and keep up his gratitude to G-d for it. Moshe’s level of appreciation may be the reason why he was chosen to be our Teacher.

A Real Jew

The Jew starts his day with the words אני מודה. The word מודה actually has two connotations. One is *confession* and the other is *thanks*. The two are very much connected, and are reflected in the Hebrew word for Jew, *yehudi*. The more we acknowledge and are thankful to G-d for everything He does for us, the better Jews (*yehudim*) we are.

This concept also applies to being thankful to other human beings. The Midrash says: כל הכופר בטובתו של חברו לבסוף כופר בטובתו של מקום (One who denies the goodness from a friend will eventually deny the goodness from G-d). Those who are ungrateful for the goodness received from others will not be happy because they will not feel thankful for the goodness received from G-d. Only gratitude and appreciation can make a person happy throughout life.

believes that G-d is out to get him. G-d does not love him anymore. “I deserve punishment, and G-d gave up on me.”

Wow. A simple question from a coach, and the Jew sitting in front of me peeled himself down like an onion. In just four minutes. He did not want to spend more time speaking about the subject. I asked him what happens to him when he thinks this way? Does he change for better, or just feel worse? He kept quiet.



Let's get this straight. No matter what, G-d loves His children. The first words we say about G-d's Thirteen Attributes is ה'ה' – Hashem does not change his love towards us one iota from before our sin to after our sin. The reason why someone might think that G-d does not love us is because of the punishment one gets after sinning. We tend to think that if G-d tells us in His Torah, as He does in this week's parasha, all the bad things that those who do not follow His Torah will suffer, that He is “stalking” us, ready to throw lightning bolts of pain and suffering at us. Far from the truth. G-d, in His Torah, is not trying to scare us, but to warn us that *this is the way of the world*. Fire burns, water evaporates and sin takes its toll. It is the way of the world, a reality, and He, our Father, is simply warning us not to cross the street blindfolded. His love for us, however, remains, and always will be, non negotiable.

The guy in the office in New York is not alone in the way he feels. Many people have mixed emotions about whether or not, and how much, G-d is on their side. On Elul, we wake up to Selihot. We start by saying לך ה' הצדקה ולנו בושת הפנים. *To You, Hashem, is the righteousness, and to us is the shame...* G-d will never and has never been “out to get” anyone. He does not have favorites. It is just not *His way*. He loves all of His children. And He loves them more than anyone can possibly imagine. More than a parent loves a child, and more than any other type of love. Much more. When things go wrong in life, and one tries to check his score with G-d, seeing how bad he behaved and if this is really the punishment that he deserved, then he is out of reality. G-d is always righteous. And always loving.

We pray in Amidah כי חטאנו לנו אבינו כי חטאנו forgive us our Father, for we have sinned. We say, after the Amidah, the words of King David למען שמך ה' וסלחת לעוני כי רב הוא חטאנו לפניך *For your Name's sake, Hashem, may you forgive my sin, for it is great. And we, the Sefardim, chant in Selihot לפניך חטאנו לפניך רחם עלינו We have sinned before You; have mercy on us. How odd. Why would anyone forgive because he was sinned against?*

Why would any King *have mercy, because His people sinned?* And why should the *greatness of the sin be a reason for it to be forgiven?*

I hope that fellow in New York is reading this, because it might change his life. G-d's Name is how we refer to Him and the way He portrays Himself to the Universe. Generally speaking, a name is not an only an identity. It is even closer to the person than identity. It *is* the person. The first of the Thirteen Attributes is that G-d will always love you. That His Name is solid. You can't budge it. *For your Name's sake, Hashem, may you forgive my sin, for it is great.* The greater the sin, the more He shows that you can't budge Him. He can still find in His love a place to forgive and overlook things after we repent. *Forgive us our father, for we have sinned...* Forgive us, our Father, because *we recognize* that we have sinned. One does not ask for forgiveness when he has wronged someone else for one of two reasons: Either the one who perpetrated the wrongdoing believes it was not so bad... or, he feels that what he did was so serious that the one whom he wronged will be unable to grant him forgiveness. Our approach to G-d, in asking for forgiveness, is – that we admit and recognize that the sin was so great that any other would not be able to forgive. Only G-d can forgive such sin, and by doing so, His Name will be sanctified. So, in Selichot, the Sefardim sing that we have sinned, because we know that G-d is the Greatest Forgiver, and it is *to Him* that we have sinned.

This thought suddenly popped into my head, while writing this article. A certain teenage boy was caught pick pocketing. The sirens went on in the store as he tried to walk out, and the police pulled right up and handcuffed the kid. He was brought to a judge. Trembling, he looked up to see who the judge was. The judge was actually his Father. His Father looked down at his trembling son and said, *Son, just empty your pockets and go home.* Is there a father who loves more than such a Father? Other fathers may take this personally: *My son, a pickpocket? I'll teach him a lesson!* But not אבינו מלכנו Our Father, our King.



This is what Tashlich is all about. We come, red handed, to the Day of Judgement, and G-d says, “No problem. Just empty out your pockets.” And then we say, standing at the water, מי א-ל כמוך נושא מי א-ל כמוך נושא Who is like You, G-d, who bears the weight of sin...?

SMALL CHANGE

In the days of Elul, everyone claims that they want to change. Change is scary because it involves struggle. It means acknowledging that the way I presently think or feel or perceive is flawed. It means that every day I have to stick to the new commitment that took me only a few moments to make. All this takes time. Something like forty days. Welcome to Elul!

As Rosh HaShanah approaches, many of us have the unfortunate feeling that “I am not ready yet for the *new me* I want to be for the *new year*.” This can cause us to feel the need to take big steps of change, something like a full court shot or a touchdown throw. When we are pressed for time, we may try to cut corners of the full *teshuvah* process, and miss out on some of the key steps to change.

When planning an attack in real war, the generals know that there are certain strategies that work and others that do not. If your Air Force flies high over the enemy, they will be identified and shot down. If, however, you have your planes fly low, they will be less easy to spot, and they will be in a better position to overcome the enemy. Similarly, when we try to make massive change, the negative tendencies built into ourselves see this as an attack, and they know how to counter it. But if it is small change, they do not perceive this as an attack – and even manage to get used to the change.

This approach is implicit in the famous parable in the Midrash which deals with the concept of *teshuvah*, and the foolishness of people who are afraid to escape their sinful habits (*Koheleth Raba* 7). A group of thieves in prison start digging secretly until they are able to tunnel out an escape route. They all escape except for one of the thieves

G-d is never the one to be “out to get” us... He is always אני לדודי ודודי לי – אלול I am to my Loved One And my Loved One is to me.

who stays behind. When the prison guard comes around for inspection, and sees how all but one member of the group escaped, he gives the straggler a beating while yelling: Fool! How did you forgo an opportunity to escape and save your life!?

Now, we might ask: Why does the Midrash compare doing *teshuvah* to digging a secret escape tunnel? Why not breaking down the door, picking the lock, or something less demanding?

The answer is that real *teshuvah* is not a frontal attack against our past behavior. Rather, it is a procedure of one small step at a time. We must do it patiently, and *dig* away at our negative priorities and beliefs. This is *teshuvah*. This is change. There is no shortcut or front door.

The fact that we have lots of work ahead of us this Elul should not cause us to feel discouraged. One reason for that is a vitally important insight of the *Mabit* in his *Beit Elokim (Shaar HaTeshuvah, Ch. 12)*. He notes that there is a major difference between the mitzvah of *teshuvah* and other mitzvot. Take, for example, the mitzvah of *tzitzit*. With strings only on three corners of our garment – instead of four – it is not as if we have fulfilled three-fourths of the mitzvah. We have accomplished nothing. In contrast, if we take only one of the 24 steps of *teshuvah* spelled out in Rabeinu Yonah’s *Sha’arei Teshuvah*, we have fulfilled a part of the mitzvah of *teshuvah*. It’s not “all or nothing.”

Another important insight which can help us this Elul is that of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter (*Ohr Yisrael, Igeret*8). R’ Yisrael first draws on the Rambam: “Everyone has merits and sins. The person who has



a majority of merits is a *tzaddik*, and the person who has a majority of sins is a *rasha* (evildoer). This scale of measurement is not according to the amount of merit or sin. Some sins are very heavy, and just a few of these outweigh a great number of merits. Similarly, certain merits outweigh a much larger number of sins. The weighing is done with G-d's judgment alone, and only He knows the weight of each merit and sin." (*Hilchot Teshuvah*, Chapter 3)

Although the Rambam does not tell us how to measure our merits or sins, R' Yisrael points out that one way to know the weight of a mitzvah or sin is by how hard or easy it is for us to fulfill it or refrain from doing it. The same sin is considered much "weightier" when it would have been easy to refrain from. And the same mitzvah is considered "weightier" when it was hard to fulfill. R' Yisrael therefore writes that if one is capable of finding

those sins that are actually easier for him to refrain from, and do *teshuvah* on them, this may very well help significantly in lightening the side of sin on the balance scale.

This is very useful information for preparing ourselves for the Day of Judgment. It means, for example, that if we cannot stop speaking *lashon hara* totally, we can at least stop ourselves when it is easy for us to refrain. If we cannot stop ourselves from not learning Torah when it is hard or difficult, at least let us learn Torah when it is easier or learn lighter subjects. If we cannot stop ourselves from getting angry every time we are provoked, maybe we can at least eliminate all the times when we are capable of some sort self-control.

And we can rest assured that if we start with that which is easy, then that which is hard will be more easily within our reach.

SYSTEM OF VALUES

The Talmud gives us an example of when a sinner can be considered a genuine *Baal Teshuvah* (penitent): *If he refrains from sinning a second time when he encounters the same woman at the same place and time where he had previously sinned (Yoma 86b).*

This is a rather puzzling test. Must a *Baal Teshuvah* actually return to the same place and the same temptation in order to prove his sincerity? Even more puzzling is the Talmud's mention of going back to the *time* of the sin. How can the penitent possibly accomplish this?

The *Kli Yakar* helps us understand what the Sages mean by drawing our attention to two key *pssukim* in our *parashah*: "*For this mitzvah is not in the heavens...nor across the sea that you may say: 'Who will cross the sea and get it for us so that we can fulfill it?' Rather, it is very close to you; it is in your mouth and heart to do it*" (*Dvarim 30:12-13*). In other words, one must not be afraid to do *teshuvah* because he might not withstand the tests that lie ahead. Neither does he need to go to the far ends of the world – to the scene of sin – in

order to prove that he will not sin again. Rather, the place of the sin is in the heart. Intense regret can return one to the place and time of sin in order to uproot it. Pain and positive regret can change the heart. They can transform past failure into lessons for the present and future. Change in perception on the part of the *Baal Teshuvah* ultimately result in change of behavior and character. And that is how we are judged on Rosh HaShanah. G-d sees our present state, and how it will result in positive change in the future. What happened in the past does not determine the ultimate verdict. What is decisive is our character and our "re-programmed" heart as we stand before the Supreme Judge on Rosh HaShanah.

We find a precedent for this approach in G-d's response to Yishmael's prayer when he and his mother Hagar seemed to have run out of water in the desert. When Yishmael felt himself close to dying of thirst, he turned to G-d and cried out for mercy. G-d was about to create a spring of water when the angels tried to intervene: *How can You bring water to the boy whose future descendants will kill Your children through thirst?* G-d



responded: *What is Yishmael at present – a tzaddik or rasha? Tzaddik! He is to be judged as he is now* – באשר הוא שם”

Why is this? Because a person's essence is what is in his mind and heart at the present moment.

This concept can help us understand a curious request we make of G-d numerous times during this High Holiday season: בספר צדיקים וחסידים – כתבנו – *Inscribe us in the Book of the Righteous and Pious*. The question is obvious. If we are righteous, we need not ask. If we are not, why would imploring G-d get us into the Book where we do not belong? How are we to understand such a request?

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzatto explains how *teshuvah* works. *When the thought of pleasure and willingness is removed from the sin, then the sin itself is erased and nullified (Messilat Yesharim Ch. 4)*. Sin is generated by an evil thought. When we oppose inner negative motives mentally and emotionally, G-d is willing to see us as different people. Although we may have sinned throughout the year, sincere thoughts of *teshuvah* can enable us to stand before G-d on Rosh Hashanah and say: *“I now perceive all that pleasure I derived from the sin as pain. I do not want to continue such actions. I am not the sinful “I” of yesterday. And I am not the “I” of tomorrow, where I might fail another test. Right now, I am a better person – the “I” I really want to be”*

There is a midrash that can help us in becoming that person we really want to be (*Midrash Aseret Hadibrot* on ללא תגזול). King Solomon was once approached by three merchants who suspected each other of pocketing the profits from their successful business trip. King Solomon replied that he would be willing to judge the case the following day. When the three merchants re-assembled, he told them about a query sent to him by the Roman Emperor involving a boy and girl who had

promised to marry when they came of age. They stipulated that in case either one would decide to marry someone else, they would first ask permission of the other party. Time passed, and the young woman found a suitable man whom she liked very much. True to her word, she took her fiancé to the door of the man she once promised to marry in order to get his permission. The man kindly accepted the woman's decision and refused the handsome present of gold and precious stones that the groom had brought along to appease him. With real sincerity, he wished the young couple a happy life together. On the way home, unfortunately, the pair was captured by a ruthless band of thieves. The booty was split between them, and the young bride was taken to the leader of the gang. She implored him to hear her story. The head of the thieves somehow found it in his heart to be merciful, and returned the bride to the groom – together with all the gold and precious stones.

King Solomon turned to the three merchants, and asked them to help decide the question sent by the Emperor: Which of the three acted most nobly – the woman who kept the promise of her youth, the man who both gave permission for her to marry someone else and refused the lavish present, or the head of the thieves who could have had both the money and the bride had his mercy not gotten the better of him?

Each one voiced a different opinion, but King Solomon commanded that the one who praised the thief be tied up and whipped. If he praised the thief who had no legal rights to the bride or valuables, then he must be a thief himself! And, of course, the man confessed.

As King Solomon wrote in the Book of Proverbs: “...a man is according to what he praises” (*Mishlei 27:21*). If we praise good deeds, then that is who we are. If we ask to be inscribed in the Book of the Righteous, it means that we really want to be righteous. And if we are sincere, that is how we are perceived by G-d as well. כן יהי רצון

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