


**Yom Kippur/  
Vayelech**

**English version**

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## THE ART OF LIVING LIFE

You have a choice to make at any given moment. Kill time, or, give time a life. No matter if you choose it actively or passively, consciously or subconsciously, the choice will be made. How do you kill time? By deciding that time is unimportant, not recognizing its worth. How do you live time? By maximizing it for what it is worth.

You want to know how valuable a year is? Ask a farmer that keeps Shmitta. You want to know how valuable a month is? Ask a mother of a premature baby. You want to know the value of a week? Ask a person who needs to leave his apartment, but can only enter his new apartment a week later. You want to know the value of an hour? Ask a parent who is waiting for their son's hour-long surgery to end. You want to know the value of a minute? Ask a person who missed the train, bus or plane. You want to know the value of a second? Ask someone who was saved from a car accident. You want to know the value of a tenth of a second? Ask the person who came in second place, in the Olympics.

Time is non-refundable, under all circumstances. 86,400 seconds a day, and it's all gone, the second the day is over.

During this time of year, there are people who are judged to have life, and that means they will make the most of their time. There are people that will be judged with death, and it means they will kill time; time will just pass, meaninglessly. And there are tzaddikim who will die, here in this world, but will live eternally. As the Maharsha says במיתתן

נקראו חיים וההפך הרשעים בחייהן קרוין מתים שהצדיק שמת הוא חיותו לעוה"ב ומיתתו בעולם הזה כמ"ש אדם כי ימות באהל וגו' אינו רק במקרה וההיפך הרשעים חייהן בעולם הזה (Rosh Hashana 16b) Because life and death, is determined, by how meaningful your life is.

The prayer that seems to repeat itself during the days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur is the prayer for life itself. Time is life. If you feel you waste too much time, and you want next year to be different, that is what we pray for when we ask for Life in our High Holiday prayers. And using your time wisely, with self-discipline, is a major factor to living a successful life. The biggest handicap to success is not a lack of brains, character, or willingness. It is the lack of self-discipline to get things done, on time.

Many people know what to do, and they *almost* do it on time. They miss it, sometimes, by only one minute. Not because they are not busy. They are busy, sometimes busier than most people. But they fail to accomplish the most important tasks on their "to do" lists. The successful wake up in the morning, immediately, like a lion. From the time they wake up, they become productive, as swift as a deer. They have their activities of the day prepared and prioritized from the night before, and they stay calm, focused on their project like an eagle, throughout the day. And, brazen like a leopard, they are not afraid to take on their most important tasks, first, no matter how scary they look.



If you do not have anything that you are busy with, learn how to fill your time with value. Volunteer, learn something new, make new relationships and connections, tend to your physical, spiritual, emotional health, read, journal, or find a new source of income. These are all valuable uses for your time.

Growing up, I could not get one particular song out of my head, even though I was not crazy about it. It was Avraham Fried's song, with words from the Ibn Ezra, אדם דואג על איבוד דמיו / ואינו דואג על איבוד אדם דואג על איבוד דמיו / וימיו אינם חוזרים / וימיו אינם חוזרים; *A person worries about the loss of his money, and is not worried about the loss of his days. His money does not help, and his days don't return.* These words are mentioned by many great Jewish authors, including Nodah Biyehuda, R' Natan from Breslov, R' Shalom Sharabi, and the Chazon Ish. This problem of valuing money, worrying over lost money and not worrying about loss of time, seems to be common to all communities! Whether you are Sephardic, Ashkenazi, Litvish or Hassidish, Kabbilistic or Bnei Braki.

When Yaakov was asked by Pharaoh how long he lived, he answered, with what seemed to be a cryptic answer. But this is how the Malbim explains it: "So far, I lived ימי מגורי, like an animal, without really living life, a total of 130 years. But, if you ask me how much of my life I actually lived, my days were short and bad, and they did not reach to the fulfillment of days of my father Yitzhak and the days of Avraham."

When the Torah eulogizes a great and successful person, it says that he/she was great at time management! Moshe, in this week's parasha, says about himself, I am **today** 120 years old. Why is that important, that Moshe was letting the people know how old he is? Because he was telling them that *all that I have become is because I made the most of my time.* Avraham died, and the Torah eulogizes him as **ואבררהם זקן**, as the Zohar explains, that his

days, were "in his possession". When Sarah Imenu died, the Torah eulogizes her, saying **ויהי חני שרה**: After the passuk tells you that Sarah lived 127 years, it tells you that "these were the years of Sarah's life". Why the repetition? The commentators tell us, *to teach us, that all of her life, was equally good.* What? She was barren for most of her life! She was taken to Pharaoh's house, to Avimelech; her father Haran, who was a follower of Avraham's beliefs, was killed, thrown into the furnace by Nimrod, when she was young, and her only son was bullied and almost killed by her step-son, and finally, she died from the shock of Satan telling her that Yitzhak had been offered as a sacrifice by her husband Avraham!! How could the Torah possibly say that all of her life was equally good?

Sarah made sure that she *lived* her days, as best as she could. She did not have "down" times. No matter what she went through, she made sure to live it to the max! Never saying, "I'm too tired. I'm off today, because I am not in the mood".

The secret of serving G-d is the steady, the continuous. Never missing. When the going gets tough, the tough get going. This is the explanation of the Midrash, found in the Ein Yaakov, "Ben Zomah says that the whole Torah is summed up in the words Shemah Yisrael. Ben Nanas says it is summed up in the words "Love your friend as yourself". Ben Pazi says, **אֶת-הַכֶּבֶשׂ אֶחָד תַּעֲשֶׂה בַבֹּקֶר**: The one sheep (Korban Tamid) you shall do in the morning, and the one sheep you will do, in the evening." The Maharal explains this (Netivot Olam 2, Ahavat Reiah, 1) that the day in, day out, steady service of G-d is a greater, more fundamental principle of service than accepting the yoke of Heaven in Shema, and not doing to others what you don't want to be done to you. Because the steady one is a person who lives life, without excuses. With productivity, and with maximizing each day G-d gives Him.

## THE ART OF DOING YOURSELF A FAVOR

There was once a contractor, a man who build homes, until he was 65. From an early age, no one

knew how to build homes like he did, so a very wealthy contractor hired him from the outset, and

they had a great relationship. At the age of 65, this contractor approached the project developer and said, "I am tired. I want to retire and enjoy my family. I am done. It was great working for you. I am ready to resign."

The project developer begged him, "I have just one more house I need you to build. Just one more. Please, don't leave, until you build one more house!" The tired contractor said, "Alright. I will do just this one last house."

And he did, although the work was done reluctantly. He cut every corner; he did the worst job ever... just to get the job done. Just to finish on good terms with his boss. He felt bad for the person who would buy this house, "but it won't be my problem to fix the leaks, the plumbing backups, the weak foundations, when the problems begin. I will be after my pension."

He handed the keys over to his boss, and his boss told him to have a seat. "You have been so loyal to me, for so many years. I didn't want to just let you go, without giving you a present. I thought to myself, the best present I can give you is a house. So, before you left, I had you build one last house, and that house will be yours! Thank you so much! I really hope you enjoy your future, with your brand new house, built in top condition, by the best builder."

The whole way home, the builder was banging his head. What have I done! The only one I fooled was myself! I have to live now, with the leaks, the weak foundations, and all the problems, for the rest of my life!!!

As we edge ever-so-close to Yom Kippur, to the end of the Asseret Yemei Teshuva, some people feel like they don't have much energy left. As people get closer to Neilah on Yom Kippur, they feel like they have already given it all they've got, and there's nothing left to give...But it's your house, your future, your life. You are not doing G-d a favor, or doing a favor for your parents or Rabbi. This is all about *your* house. Your going to have to deal with it. No one else.

Every one is looking for something to take on as a merit, as a token of improvement and change. With

just a few hours left before Yom Kippur, we are at the bottom of the ninth, with two strikes. There are some things that are sure homeruns, that will for sure tip the scales. One of them is to stop talking in Shul.

The other day, I mentioned in a class what R' Chaim Palaji brings from the Tikunei Zohar, from R' Shimon Bar Yochai. (Tochachot Chaim Teruma; Tikun 18 page 33b) There are three books that are opened when people are praying. The book of the Tzaddikim whose prayers are answered immediately, the book of the Middle of the Road whose prayers are listened to, but are not allowed "in", and the book of the Wicked who are pushed away from G-d, and their prayers are not answered. Who are the wicked, R' Shimon asks? The ones who will be written in the book of the wicked are those who speak in Shul, during prayers! רשיעיים אדחיינ מתמן ולא יהיב שאלתינ דילהון אלא עלייהו אתמר מי בקש זאת מידכם רמס חצרי ואלין אינון רשיעיים דהוו מבזין למלכא בצלותהון דמנחן למשמע צלותא ופסקין לה על שיחה בטלה . Their prayers will not be answered, because they are destroying G-d's Courtyards!!! They are belittling the King with their prayers!!!

I gave this class, and I got some slack. Someone complained, "Rabbi, I don't like it when rabbis mention the punishment of things that we are doing wrong. Please be more sensitive, because you might be turning off some people."

I felt he had a good point. After all, I don't want to hurt anybody's feelings. I should be thankful that the person is coming to shul! But when I discussed his comment with my wife, she told me the story of the contractor. Baruch Hashem, I don't have a Rabbi job, so I am not scared of getting fired. I work for G-d, and I try to help people build their houses in the next world. If I could only teach a person that by not speaking in shul, he is not only doing the whole shul a favor; most of all, he is doing himself a favor! Someone who speaks in Shul, he is removing G-d's Presence both from the shul and from the Jewish nation, G-d forbid! (Chatam Sofer) Why should we be sensitive to a person who is the most insensitive?! The Chida says, better that this person should not come to shul! (Brought down in Kaf Hachayim 151;8) It's the only instance mentioned in Shulchan Aruch

where the halacha is to *yell at the person* who dares to speak during prayers, in the Chazzara. (Sh. A.' 124)

There are so many mitzvot where we got it all wrong. We think that when we give Tzeddaka, we are “helping” G-d, doing Him a favor. G-d doesn't need you, or me, to help His Yeshivot, His Kollelim, His poor people, His widows, His special children, His orphans, .... He has a million and one ways, but He is giving you and me an opportunity to rip up our evil decrees. (Rosh Hashana 16b) We think we are doing G-d a favor when we are wearing Tzitzit, while every minute you wear Tzitzit, you get 613 mitzvot. (Nedarim 25a; Sephardim need to wear wool Tzitzit, even in summer, to get this amazing deal. Sh' A, Rambam ). We think we are doing G-d a favor when we check our clothes from Shaatnez, while in truth, if you have Shaatnez in your clothing, your prayers

#### ART OF APOLOGY

Erev Yom Kippur, I witnessed something very sad. The Jewish Law is that Yom Kippur cleanses only sins between Man and G-d. But if you sinned against a fellow Jew, after Yom Kippur you will still have that sin on your records – unless you ask for forgiveness. You need to apologize. Now, we all make mistakes, and we all need to ask forgiveness, some time or another in life. Many wait for Yom Kippur eve, and “by the way” ask people for forgiveness. “Are you mochel me? “ “Do you forgive me?” Some people do not even ask forgiveness on Yom Kippur eve. They feel embarrassed, do not know how to do it, do not believe that forgiveness is attainable, or all of the above. What I witnessed Yom Kippur eve was sad. One sibling waited a couple of years to muster up the courage to ask another sibling on Yom Kippur eve to forgive and leave things behind them. But, the other sibling just turned around and walked away. A few more attempts, and the sibling who was being approached just said to the one asking forgiveness to “go get a life”. It was too late, too close to Yom Kippur, and the bad feelings and sins between the two of them would linger on for a very long time. Too long. *Unless* they would learn *how* to ask forgiveness. It is sad, because one sibling really wanted to change the relationship for

will never be answered. (Rekanti Kedoshim) Not even on Yom Kippur. The Satan has a day off on Yom Kippur, (Yoma 20a) as hinted in his name השטן, numerical value of 364, because there is only one day of 365 days of the year that he is off. But there is one thing that gives the Satan the ability to stop a person's prayers on Yom Kippur: if the person is wearing Shaatnez. (Yaarot Dvash, on the story why we eat fish in the meal before Yom Kippur, because of the “tailor”.) Every Shabbat we keep, G-d forgives even the severest of sins, like idolatry. Do yourself a favor and wear Tzitzit, check your clothes for shaatnez, learn how to keep shabbat, don't speak in shul, and pour your heart out on Yom Kippur in shul, until the very last prayer.

This is your life, your future; don't take any shortcuts.

the better. He really wanted to move on. And now, after having been turned away, the animosity just grew.

People rely on the dictum that if you ask for forgiveness three times and are rejected, the sin is no longer yours, but belongs, now, to the person you sinned against. People forget to read the words of our rabbis closely. Our Rabbis tell us that it is not enough to ask “Are you Mochel me?” three times. We need something called **ופיוס דברי ריבוי**, and **עד שירצה את חבריו**. What are these things? After learning this article you will know what they are, and you will know *how* to ask forgiveness. It boils down to the old rule of successful communication, it is not *what* you say, but *how* you say it.

On the way back from Yaakov's funeral, Yosef stopped by the pit that the brothers had thrown him into. As Yosef just stood there, looking over the pit, the brothers observed Yosef mumbling something to himself. They figured that now that his father was no longer living, Yosef was plotting revenge against them. (Yosef was actually blessing G-d at the pit **ברוך... שעשה לי נס במקום הזה**, for making a miracle for Yosef in that place, the place where he almost died.) Also, after



Yaakov's death, the brothers noticed that Yosef did not invite them to eat with him at his palace anymore. They assumed that that, also, was because he wanted to take revenge. (But Yosef was actually just not sure how to make the seating arrangements in such a way that no one would get insulted. While Yaakov was alive, he, himself, would make the seating arrangements, putting Yosef at the head of the table.) The Torah tells us that the brothers feared Yosef's revenge, and that is why they asked forgiveness.

Also, the brothers did not apologize themselves; rather, they asked the brothers closest to Yosef, (sons of his mother's maid, Bilhah, whom he was close to) to ask forgiveness on their behalf. Rabbeinu Bachyeh tells us something very important. Yosef told them they did not need to worry. He never literally told them "I forgive you". And because he *never explicitly said*, "I forgive you", the sin was never forgiven. This, despite the fact that Yosef forgave them wholeheartedly, and he even cried when they suspected him of planning to take revenge. Still, Rabbeinu Bachyeh says because there was not an explicit "I forgive you", the Jewish people needed to suffer the loss of the *עשרה הרוגי מלכות*, the Ten Martyrs many years later. Ten martyrs, for the sin of each one of the ten tribes. *All because the apology was incomplete.*

So, I researched the best way to apologize, to make the apology complete. Step one. Remorse. "I am sorry..." "I apologize..." But do not stop! The problem with just saying these two words alone, is that "Sorry, Excuse me, I apologize, Slicha" are used too freely. The remorse needs to sound genuine. If it is not genuine, it can make the original insult even stronger. Even if it is authentic, but if it *sounds* fake, it has an opposite effect. *The way to properly express remorse is to fill up the sentence, explaining specifically what you are sorry about.* This does not mean bringing up the sin, but *דברי ריצוי*. I apologize *for talking in a way that was out of line*. Not, I apologize for calling you stupid, which could be another sin in of itself, for repeating the insult and bringing him back to the pain. The *דברי ריצוי* is showing that you wish to make amends. *If there is anything I can do to*

*make things better, let me know. I promise that I will do my best.* This is from the most powerful parts of the apology .

We see that Yaakov asked forgiveness this way. When Yaakov apologized to Yosef for not burying Rachel in Maarat Hamachpella but on the road, Yaakov did not just say he was sorry, "It was out of my hands". Yaakov explained himself at length, defining exactly what he was sorry about and the circumstances that brought him to act as he did. (See Rashi and Midrashim, four reasons that Yaakov told Yosef why he buried Rachel in Beth Lechem).

Point two. If the person has other reasons why he is apologizing, such as fear, it also makes the apology come across as weak. This is why waiting for Yom Kippur to start the apology process is not advisable. Erev Yom Kippur is a time to ask for forgiveness, *after first having made amends a while previously*. Otherwise, it might look cheap, as if you are not remorseful about the sinful act, but nervous about Yom Kippur. The person feels forced to forgive, but your relationship with him will stay bleak. It is not only for religious reasons that you need to apologize, to cleanse yourself from sin. It is *to improve your relationships*. Just hear the thought, "Just because you have Yom Kippur to worry about, that doesn't mean I should accept your apology."

Even in accepting apology, it is important *not to* keep it short. Yosef answered the apology saying, "*Do not fear... אני התחת אלקים אני I instead of G-d? I can't harm you, even if I wanted to. Because of you, my brothers, the Egyptians realized that I am not a slave, but that I am part of a prestigious family. If I will harm you, the Egyptians will deduce that you must not be my brothers, "Did you ever see a brother kill his own brother?"* This is strange. The same reason that Yosef told them why he would not kill them, *that same reason was great rebuke to his brothers who did try to kill their own brother*. How could Yosef bring up the argument that a normal man would not kill his brother, something that they actually plotted to do? This was a time that they were expressing remorse! We see from here what Yosef was telling them, and what was in Yosef's

mind. Yosef told them, *When you sold me, when you wanted to kill me, it could not make sense unless G-d had wanted you to think in such a way. For even an Egyptian knows that a brother does not kill a brother. The only reason you thought in such a way must be because G-d had a plan. G-d must have put such thoughts in your minds.* (The Midrashim tell us that immediately after selling Yosef, the brothers did not understand how they could have done such a thing.) **Yosef was able to forgive them, because he was able to see G-d in the picture.** Either way, Yosef consoled his brothers at length, telling them two things. They had nothing to worry about (אל היראו), and that **they were not to blame** (התחת אלקים אני). If a person accepts apology and shows the offender that he understands him and that he is not to blame, the original, good relationship will be immediately restored.

And a few more pointers . **Point 3.** The person who did something wrong should, himself, come and

ask forgiveness. It is part of the expression of sincere remorse. **Point 4.** It is *important not to give excuses* for your behavior, *in a way that sounds as if you are not taking responsibility for what you did.* When you take responsibility and promise that it won't happen again, there is a greater chance that the other person will forgive you. (This does not mean to take too much responsibility). **Point 5.** Never expect forgiveness right away. It takes time for the hurt person to get over his feelings and recover from the painful incident.

When you apologize properly, people will forgive. All you have to do is to remember to say SORRY.

Sentence: Short, Sincere, but full sentence. Obligate yourself to make amends. Responsibility for the insult, no excuses. Rest. Let it sink in. Never demand forgiveness, let the other person know that you understand him, if it is hard for him to forgive yourself. Apologize in person.

## KEEPING TO YOUR SCRIPT

One of the biggest problems facing the Orthodox is not being able to feel closeness with G-d. "Rabbi, I want to feel the *Yomim Tovim* more, I want my Shabbat table to be more spiritual, I want my prayers to have more fire in them..."

We are talking about good, Orthodox Jews who are trying. People who really *are* close to G-d, who really *are* trying to be good Jews, but not *feeling* closeness, not feeling connected. It seems that feeling closer is obviously much deeper than doing something different. It seems to be more about *being* something different.

I would like to look at our role of serving G-d from a fresh perspective. I will call it "the Yom Kippur perspective." There is a mitzvah to do *teshuva* every day of the year. What is special about the *Teshuva* of the *Yomim Noraim*, of the High Holidays?

The *Teshuva* that is to be made in these days is not just about what you have done. But about who you have become, and all that is a result. Yom Kippur

is about doing *Teshuva* because you are not doing your *Tafkid*, the purpose you were created for.

In the *Viduy* of Yom Kippur, we say something interesting. עד שלא נוצרתי איני כדאי. *Before I was born, I had no worth.* What? We are saying *Viduy* for how we were before our birth? What could we have possibly done wrong before we were born?

Before I was born, for almost 6000 years, my soul was waiting for this generation to be sent down by G-d. To be born into *my* family, with *my* parents and *my* siblings, into *my* community, and to be created the exact time I was created. At the precise, predetermined second. Your *Neshama* was destined to enter the world in exactly the minute it came, to exactly the parents you have and into the story that is specifically yours. *Before I was born, I wasn't ready to be born, for my destiny had not yet begun.*

And this is what we say *Viduy* about. ועכשיו שנוצרתי כאלו לא נוצרתי. *And now that I have been born, it is as if I had not been born.* I was not worthy of being created by G-d until now, because before, I

was not able to fulfill my *Tafkid*. I could not bring G-dliness to the world, in my unique way, until today. And now that I have been created, I am looking around at everyone else, copying others' ways of serving G-d, trying to be everyone else except myself! I waited so long to get on my unique stage for G-dliness, and I forgot the script!!! *And now that I have been created, it is as if I have not been created.*

This is the message of the story of Yonah, in its metaphoric version. (Vilna Gaon; Mishna Berurah 622 Sh. Tzi. 6) Each Jew comes down for a purpose; each soul is here on a mission. And sometimes, we try to run away from what we are supposed to be doing. And, when one runs away, G-d keeps sending the person back until the *Tafkid* is done.

How do we know what our soul's mission is about? The Arizal taught his students that those things that you are having difficulty with are the reason you are here. And your *Tafkid* is for those things that you are needed for. We need to dedicate our lives to where we are needed most. We need to dedicate our energies to those areas in which we can make our unique contribution.

Sometimes, your "lot" is to be a "holy being," something like the goat that is brought as a *Korban* for Hashem. And sometimes, your lot is to be like the "*LaAzazel*" goat - to bring out G-dliness in what does not appear to be a G-dly way. I will explain.

Yom Kippur is the day that is like Purim. Purim is about Esther: a righteous woman who needed to be in the most impure places, to defile herself. That was her mission. That was what she was needed for, in order to save the Jewish Nation. And that is what her Rabbi told her to do. Purim is about Mordechai, a great Torah Scholar, one of the Gedolei Hador, from the head of the Sanhedrin, who needed to sacrifice his high level of learning in order to save Klal Yisrael. Esther and Mordechai are the ultimate example of living their *Tafkid*. And sometimes in life, you think that you are being a tzaddik, but by not living up to your soul's purpose, you can be this "passive-aggressive Haman." עד דלא ידע בין ארור המן לברוך מרדכי

Rabbi YY Jacobson said, in the name of his Rebbi, something very powerful. We know that Reuven saved Yosef from his brothers, by putting him in the pit. Then, the brothers sat down to eat lunch, and during lunch, Shimon and Levi decided to kill Yosef. Yehuda saved Yosef by selling him. Reuven came back to the pit, and Yosef was gone. Reuven tore his clothes, and asked his brothers what they had done. *And, now, how was he to face his father?*

Rashi asks, where was Reuven at the time of the sale? Why did he disappear, when his brothers sat down for lunch? Because Reuven went to do his fasting, to clothe himself in sackcloth and ashes, for his hasty act of moving his father's bed next to his mother, Leah's, so many years earlier. He was doing his holy thing.

*But, Reuven! You could have saved us all from 210 years of slavery in Egypt, had you just stayed there at the pit and watched over your brother! Had you not been busy doing Teshuva, but instead, had kept your eyes on your brother in the pit, you could have gotten forgiveness for your mistake from your father, just by being responsible and saving your brother Yosef's life!!* How many times do we not notice our "brother in the pit," because we are too busy with our own lofty levels of spirituality?

What do Reuven and the brothers have to do with Yom Kippur? EVERYTHING! What are the words in Yom Kippur Mahzor, immediately before the words mentioned about the fact that we are not doing our *Tafkid*? כי אתה סולחן לישראל ומוחלן לשבטי ישראל For You are the One who forgives Yisrael, and You forgive the Tribes! Why are we mentioning the Tribes on Yom Kippur? Because we bring the sacrifice of a goat to remind us that the reason we suffer so much is for not taking responsibility for each other and atone for that sin. The Tribes dipped Yosef's striped coat in goat's blood and brought it to their father Yaakov.

How can a person who is being so frum, so holy, be like a Haman? Well, I can't think of something as aggressive as a Haman. But I can think of what would have happened if Esther had stayed away from Achashverosh. She could have let Haman do what he wanted to do. Because she was being holy. And the same could have happened if Mordechai

would not stop his high level of continuous Torah study to guide Esther and take control of the situation.

So, how do we feel close to G-d? The Baal Shem Tov would say that if you want to speak to G-d, speak to the person who you have a hard time being nice to. Because G-d is right over his shoulder. שוייתי יקוק לנגדי תמיד *I will place Hashem opposite me always*. The word לנגדי, the Baal Shem Tov would say, is referring to the one opposite me, *my opposition*. But I would like to change that a drop, in line with the Arizal's way of discovering our *Tafkid*. *G-d is there wherever you have opposition in life*. To fix the Middah that is hardest for you to fix. Jealousy. Self-Centeredness. Lust. Anger. Our soul was sent to this world to fix that Middah that is hardest to fix, and if we do not, that Middah takes over our life. The Shofar is the acronym of the words שורש פורה ראש ולענה. There is

### THE SECRET INGREDIENT TO TRULY FORGIVE

On my way back from *Tashlich*, a yeshiva student approached me with a touchy subject. I asked him if he believes in this *Tashlich* thing, that you can get rid of sin, do *Teshuvah* and become a new person. He said he did not believe that G-d lets us just throw away our sins, especially if there are high stakes that the sins might be repeated. "I am not going to really change anyway. I am the same guy as last year and two years ago, and I know that there will be another Yom Kippur that I will have to change again anyway. So, why should I invest my efforts into something that will fail, to begin with?"

I asked him, "What would happen if you tried a bit harder to learn, to pray, to be a better you... What would happen then?" His answer was, "It's nice. But then, sometime soon, when I catch myself doing what I am not supposed to do, seeing what I am not supposed to see, *then I view myself as if all the good that I did was all a fake!* Why should I aspire to spiritual greatness, put my mind and heart towards that when I am, anyway, a *spiritual shrimp?*" Good question.

And this is how I responded. The main theme in the Amidah of Mussaf Rosh Hashana is *Malchuyot, Zichronot* and *Shofarot*. *Zichronot* are about how

a root of bad inside each and every one of us. If we do not uproot it, it only gets worse. The Shofar blast is meant to wake us up and have us notice what we need to correct. No matter how many years we have been working on it, that is what we are here for. That is our *Tafkid*.

When you experience or encounter a difficulty in life, G-d is so close. He gave you that *Tafkid*. When you are facing a seemingly insurmountable difficulty, that is what G-d put you here for. Until you accept the fact that when you have no options, and you are having difficulty, that is your *Tafkid*, the mission of your soul. Until you humble yourself to the array of options that G-d puts in front of you, YOU WILL NEVER FEEL CLOSE. You might be very close to G-d, but you will not feel it, until you accept that your circumstance is part of your mission. And it is from that situation that G-d wants you to connect.

G-d reminds Himself of actions or situations that caused Him to be merciful, and put into action His attribute of mercy. The first on the list is how G-d remembered Noah in the Ark and saved him. This year, I bought a new R. H. Machzor, and what it said in the footnote brought me to tears... "Even though we do not have deeds that make us deserving of being remembered for the good in judgment, when we measure these deeds against ourselves, (for most of our good actions are tainted with emptiness) even so, compared to others that are on yet a lower level than ours, we are worthy of Your love and compassion. For, just as You remembered Noah with love when You judged him, Your love to him was not determined by the greatness of Noah's acts (as R Yochanan said, Noah lacked *Emunah*. He lacked faith in G-d and did not enter the Ark until the water reached his ankles, for he did not believe that there would really be a flood). Still, You remembered Noah with love, *when You compared him to the people of his generation*. נח איש צדיק תמים היה בדרתו.

There are endless perspectives from which G-d can view us in judgment. By and large, the way we judge ourselves, the way we judge others, is in accordance with our expectations of them and our view of how they are supposed to act. Who says



our expectations are realistic, and that this is the way G-d sees things? Who says that someone who tries and fails is a *spiritual shrimp*, or a *faker*?

I asked the yeshiva student, “What is the first name of the most serious, most studious boy in Yeshiva? You know, the one who prays and learns with fire?” “Shimon,” he replied. “And if you caught Shimon when he was overtaken by his temptations, looking where he is not supposed to, or not living up to his standards, what would your opinion of him be?” “Shimon is one big faker!” was his quick reply.

Why do we judge Shimon like that? Why is Shimon, who learns the whole day with fire, prays with fire most of the time, considered the fake Shimon, while the Shimon that we caught when his Yetzer Harah caught him, is the real Shimon? Maybe it is the other way around!!! Maybe Shimon who was caught by his Yetzer Hara was the fake Shimon, the Shimon who is *faking it*, while the real Shimon is the one we know in the Study Hall!!

This is the core element of all forgiveness. The art of reframing. Reframing the context. “In light of ...,” things are different. This is how we can forgive ourselves and others, and this is how G-d forgives us. G-d does not just let things go. That is not what forgiveness is about. Forgiveness is powered by G-d’s Mercy, *Rachamim*. The root of the word *Rachamim* is *Rechem*, a womb. A womb makes place within itself for something else, even though there is, ostensibly, no more room. *Rachamim* is making room for another perspective.

### WHY MOST REPENTERS DON’T REPENT

Mentors of Mussar teach us that Teshuva does not mean to be better. It means to be different. The fellow who discovers that he got on the train that is going in the opposite direction from his destination cannot just get up and sit in the seat facing the direction of where he wishes he was going. He’s got to get off the train. Find where he went wrong. And start on a new track. When people discover that they have gotten themselves into a habit that does them no good, the solution is never on the same plateau as the problem. Only uprooting and starting again can make the difference.

Looking at yourself, at others, in a way that will give room for justification.

The all-time master of reframing perspectives was R’ Levi Yitzhak from Berdichev, who would always find a way to judge a Jew in the most positive light, even the greatest sinner. His Hassid noticed that when he was invited to attend a Brit Milah, his Rebbe always asked if there would be a proper *Seudah*. Otherwise, he did not attend. The Hassid asked R’ Levi Yitzhak why he wanted to make sure that a proper *Seudah* had been planned.

“My greatest defense for the sinners of the Jewish Nation to the prosecuting angels is the *Seudah* of a Mitzvah. Even the greatest sinner in Klal Yisrael does not throw a party when he “sins big.” Most sins are committed in private. But for a Mitzvah, we make a *Seudah*, we make a whole *ta-ra-rum*. This merit cries out to the Heavens that we are happy to perform mitzvot, and we are not happy about our sins! A proper *Seudat Mitzvah* is prime time for presenting this claim to the Heavens!!”

It is hard to forgive others, even though it is something we all want to do before Yom Kippur. And it is even harder for us to forgive ourselves. But, if you cannot respect others for the good things they do, finding a perspective from which you can forgive them, you will continue on for another year holding the same emotional pain in your heart. And, if you can’t respect *yourself* for the “little spiritual things” you do, like wearing a Yarmulke, then you can never believe that you are worthy of investing energy in your spiritual goals.

This we find in the words of Rabbeinu Yonah in his Iggeret Hateshuva. There is only one way to do Teshuva: It is by seeing yourself as a new person and starting afresh. Getting into the “now” and making sure that you do your best that such a mistake will not be repeated. It is not to live in the past and in regret. Regret is a delicately sensitive feeling, and one that has its very specific time and place. Regret can be effective only AFTER a person has changed. Despite the fact that Teshuva is a combination of הרטה and קבלה על העתיד, *Regret for the past* and *Accepting a new path for the future*, Teshuva does not start with

regret. (This may be the reason why G-d made Rosh Hashana before Yom Kippur: to teach us that before we work on atonement, scrubbing the sins of the past by means of regret, we must initiate a new beginning.) And most people get so busy with regret that they just never do teshuva, no matter how much they try.

Imagine someone who speaks gossip about his/her brother only a day after Rosh Hashana. He wishes he had not said what he did. He feels so bad about what he said. For some people, this feeling stays for a few minutes, and for others, a few days. But most people get so engrossed in the thought of the past, so involved in the regret, that they just forget about what they *should* do to make sure that they won't ever speak about their brother like that again. Real teshuva would be taking fifteen minutes a day to study Shemirat Halashon.

This is true about most things that we would like to do teshuva for. We usually attempt teshuva on things that we feel bad about. And then, we get so busy feeling bad about them that we get sidetracked and end up not rectifying them. Regret, says R' Yonah, should be reserved for *after* change. When someone recognizes faulty behavior in himself, he should first figure out what new habits need to be adopted. Then, he should put the new behavior into practice, and only then, after he has already affected a change, can he go through the hell of regret.

Why in this order?

R' Hutner writes that although the Mitzvah of Teshuva is a Mitzvah Temidit, a constant mitzvah that can and should be done at any time, in any place, learnt from the words of King David **וְהִטְאֵתִי נִגְדֵי תַמְיִד**, still and all, this refers to the part of Teshuva that involves making changes for the

future, not to regret. Regret, in its deepest essence, has its root in anger, in not accepting one's past self or behaviors, and is a close cousin to rebuke. The word rebuke is usually understood by us as reprimanding others. R' Hutner points out that regret is actually rebuking oneself. And, says R' Hutner, just as rebuke is a mitzvah, so is regret. The problem is that just as rebuke is something that most people are not capable of doing properly, so too is having regret for sin. Although regret is necessary, it must be felt in the proper way, with caution. The reason it is so hard to rebuke another person is that the other person automatically feels that you are out to get him, or that you do not understand him, or because there is some other underlying issue. All these components may be playing behind the scenes when someone is rebuking himself through regret. One can feel that he does not understand *himself*. Or that the thoughts are just automatic thoughts knocking one's self image. It is very hard to judge others, and no less difficult to judge oneself. It's hard to recognize one's personal strengths at the same time when one is regretting actions where weakness reigns. Therefore, says R' Hutner, regret cannot be a Mitzvah Temidit. This is so ironic, because most people who want to do Teshuva for something in the past just cannot seem to get the regret out of their head, making it somewhat Temidi. That is the only part that *cannot* be Temidi.

The key to Teshuva is to be able to be in the "now", finding what is the best way to make sure the sin will not happen again. Not in the slightest way. Only then should one get emotional about it. But when one gets emotional first, then change just passes us by, while we just keep grinding thoughts of the past, and forgetting to take responsibility for the future.

## FATHERLY FORGIVENESS

The words of our prayers are precise. There is not one bit of redundancy or random usage of words. The Great Assembly revealed to us with their Torah knowledge and prophecy, the code we use to dial G-d, the prayers as we have them in our Siddur. We refer to G-d as YKVK, *Elokim*, *Kel*,

*Avinu*, *Malkenu*, etc. Each title or Name has a specific purpose, a rhyme and reason, when and where they are meticulously placed in our prayers. For example, we refer to G-d specifically as *Kel*, Almighty, specifically regarding cure, (כי א-ל רופא), forgiveness (כי א-ל טוב וסלח אתה), and

financial blessing (כי א-ל טוב ומטיב אתה ומברך השנים) / (הא-ל הזן אותנו and redemption. If He can create something from nothing, for sure, He can create a cure, a way to forgive and accept, and a financial solution, and redeem us.

Of course, G-d is One, and even if He has 13 Middot of Mercy, they are merely attributes, but of One G-d. Even 13 is the numerical value of the word אחד, One. The Attributes are just different ways He behaves and reveals Himself to us, different ways He relates.

There is a description we make mention of when dialing G-d for forgiveness and mercy in difficult times. *Avinu*, our Father. השיבנו אבינו לתורתך/ סלה לנו. *Return us our Father to your Torah/ Forgive us our Father for we have erred/ Answer us our Father on our fast day.* We also find this description of Father regarding our request to ask for Torah clarity, in the blessing before *Kriyat Shema* אבינו אב הרחמן... המרחם רחם עלינו ותן בליבנו בינה להבין אשריכם ישראל לפני מי. When R' Akiva teaches us how lucky we are because of Who forgives us, he teaches *Fortunate are you, Yisrael, in front of Who are you becoming pure, and Who is purifying you? Your Father in Heaven.* R' Akiva prayed for rain and was answered, even though his Rebbi, R' Eliezer B. Hurkenus, who was just as great or maybe greater, was not answered. Even though R' Eliezer prayed 24 prayers, and R' Akiva prayed only two! What did R' Akiva pray? אבינו מלכנו אין לנו מלך אלא אתה. Our Father our King, we do not have another King except for you! Our Father, our King, for Your sake have mercy on us.

What is the difference between *Avinu* and *Malkenu*, our Father and our King? Why is the title *Avinu*, our Father, used when we ask for forgiveness and in times of stress? And why do we specifically use the referral of Father regarding His teaching us Torah?

The difference between father and king is that when you disobey and get hurt because you broke the rule, the father cares less about the fact that you violated his word and cares more about the fact that you got hurt. King, on the other hand, cares more

about the fact that you disobeyed his command. Hashem gave us His Torah, because He cares for us, like a Father. רצה ה' לזכות את ישראל לפיכך הרבה. He wants us to have the best *Olam Haze* and *Olam Haba* possible. When you disobey, He cares that you got hurt, that you are in pain, resulting from the sin, and He wants more than anything to help you out. G-d is also referred to as King, on the other hand, in that He does not need to answer up to anyone, and if He wills to do you good, nothing can hold him back, whereas a father may want to help his son, but not always able to. אבינו מלכנו, is a hybrid prayer, accessing the power of Father, and King.

The Rosh writes the reason why G-d wills that we eat a meal on Erev Yom Kippur, “to show His love, like a person who has a favorite child and decrees that the child fasts a day, he commands to feed and give drink to the child on the day before the fast, so that the child can manage the fast. G-d, too, commands us to fast for our sake, to forgive our sins, and warns us to eat and drink Erev Yom Kippur because He loves us and is worried for us.”

A Heavenly voice came out when R' Akiva's prayers were answered, and R Eliezer's was not. “It is not because this one is greater than that one... Rather, it is because R' Akiva was forgiving and patient, while R' Eliezer was not forgiving and patient.” (Taanit 25b) For the 13 attributes to work for you to bring you G-d's mercy, it is not enough to say them; you must also behave them. תעשו לפני. This gives G-d the power to act with mercy and patience towards you when you have mercy and patience. תנו עוז לאלוקים. The power of R' Akiva's prayer was the power of his patience, so that is why he referred to G-d as אבינו, Our Father, as there is nothing more that will make you patient than being a father. We prefer during High Holidays a Hazzan who is a father. A father is not only mastering patience but also learning responsibility for others.

The merit of patience and responsibility is so great. It is just as great as the ultimate self-sacrifice, *Akeidat Yitzhak*. The Midrash tells us that when G-d exiled our people at the destruction of the First Temple, He asked our Patriarchs and leaders in Heaven to pray for the Jewish Nation's merit that

He will bring them back to the Holy Land. Avraham mentioned sacrificing his only son, his only future, for G-d. Yitzhak mentioned his ultimate self-sacrifice. Yaakov mentioned his patience in bringing up the tribes and being responsible for them. Moshe mentioned his responsibility and patience in being a leader. (Eicha Rabti Peticha 24) It seems that patience and responsibility, are equal to self-sacrifice, and when we want to ask G-d to annul a decree, there is nothing more powerful!

Another unique dimension of Father is that a Father knows his son more than the son knows himself. A person is primarily affected by his Nature (49%) and how he was Nurtured (51%). Nature: DNA, family strengths and weaknesses, personal strengths and weaknesses, behaviors, and

personality that you were born with. Nurture: How you were nurtured from your birthday, until now. Who were the people in your life, their beliefs, what system (family, school, community, social circle, culture) you were born into, and where you were positioned in that system. Nature and Nurture are what you were made up of, your hard drive, which is not good or bad. This is how G-d set you up, and no one, not even you, can be aware and keep track of your Nature and Nurture like G-d, our Father, can. If you sinned, if you have a hard time repenting or fighting your inclinations, He is your Father and knows what you are going through, what you are dealing with, and how much free choice you have. G-d accepts you, even when you do not accept yourself, and loves you even when you do not love yourself... because He is your Father.

### Selfie Steps to *Teshuva*:

1. All change needs to go through three steps I call Triple A. Awareness. Acceptance. Action. You need to master these three to make a long-lasting impact. Awareness of what you have done and the result of your actions. Awareness of the two things you are made up of, your Nature, how you were Nurtured, and what options and choices you have available to you.
2. You need to Accept who you are, accept the situation you are in, accept the people in your life for who they are, accept G-d's decision of how He runs His world, and only then can you take action to change. Those who change know that you can only change yourself, you can only change how you feel and behave, and you can only change the present. The only way to do this is by realizing that G-d accepts us for who we are. He just does not accept our behaviors, thoughts, or feelings when they are not in line with His Torah.
3. Action. Make a list of all the things that would be great if you were able to change. Now find the one thing from that list that if you changed that one thing, it will have the most significant impact on the rest of your list of things to change. (I found that the most significant thing that would impact my change is to make a detailed schedule on my calendar of the next day in advance and then stick to my calendar. These 15 minutes a day of scheduling has had the most significant impact on the rest of my goals.)

## A LIFE AT FULL THROTTLE

Are you going through life at the speed limits you set for yourself? Or are you at full throttle?

This question has been going through my head over the last two months. And I am so grateful that it has. This is the "charged" life, where you question all of your limitations. Your limited

beliefs. Your limited relationships. Your limited perspective of yourself, of who you can be, of how much you can forgive, and how much love of G-d you can bring to your family and to your world.

The question you need to ask yourself is this: *What do I dare myself to do?* i.e., Who do I dare myself



to forgive? How low am I willing to lower my ego, to be the best father/husband/ Rabbi/ brother/ brother-in-law/ son-in-law/ employer/ employee/ Jew, I can be?

This “dare-question” is the trillion-dollar question. If you do not dare, you are not putting your greatness on the other side of the seesaw of your inflated ego. Only when you dare yourself, do you bring endless energy into your life. Where does that energy come from? G-d gives it to you. How so?

We know of only one prayer that G-d prays. And His prayer is that He behave with His children with a full throttle of mercy, with no limits of judgment. From where do we know that G-d prays? וְהִבִּיאֹתֵם אֵלַי הַר קְדוֹשִׁי וְשִׂמְחֵתִים בְּבֵית תְּפִלָּתִי ” (ישעיה נז,ז) *And I will bring them to My holy mountain. And I will make them happy in the house of My prayer...* (Yeshayah 56,7) *G-d’s prayer. What does He pray? May it be the will before Me, that my Mercy overcome My anger.* This is the underlying prayer of Yom Kippur, that the Kohen Gadol asks in the Holy of Holies. (Berachot 7a) This is the main work that we need to work on for the great Yom Kippur ahead of us.

G-d loves it when we challenge ourselves and when we do, His Attribute of Mercy overpowers His Judgment. This is what it means when we say, (כרחם אב על בנים כן תרחם עלינו) *Selichot Shiva Assar Btamuz*) G-d has mercy on us, like the greatest mercy in the world, the mercy of a father to his son. (See Tehillim 103;13) Our Rabbis tell us which Av, which father’s mercy, is meant in the *passuk*. *Like Avraham Avinu had on Yishmael. Like David had on Avshalom.* The greater that you have mercy for those that don’t deserve it, the greater the mercy G-d will have on you. As Mama Rachel, Rachel our Matriarch’s mercy, “challenged” G-d’s Mercy, in Yaakov Shwekey’s classic:

*When her plaintive cry gained divine consent  
A challenge to her Maker  
Can the mercy of mere flesh and blood  
Run deeper than Yours, our Creator?*

How low are you willing to lower your ego for the sake of your relationships? Rachel was willing to give up her relationship with her husband, her

Matriarch ID, even her life, just so that her sister Leah wouldn’t cry anymore. And with this conquering of her natural impulses, she was able to confront G-d’s Mercy. And G-d accepted this confrontation, and displayed how great His Mercy is, as He promised to heed her call, and bring back His Children to their land.

Your ability to put your ego aside for the sake of something greater is what G-d loves about you most. הַבֶּן יִקִּיר לִי אֶפְרַיִם אִם יִלְדֶּה שְׂעִשְׁעִים כִּי־מִדֵּי דְבַרִּי בּוֹ יִזְכֹּר אֶזְכְּרֶנּוּ עוֹד עַל־כֵּן הִמּוּ מֵעַי לִדְרַחֵם אֶרְחָמֶנּוּ נְאֻם־יְהוָה: (Yirmiyahu 31 ,19) *Is Ephraim dear to me? Is he a darling child, for whenever I speak of him, I remember him even more intensely? That is why My innards are moved because of him; I will surely have mercy on him. The word of G-d.*

Who is this Ephraim, that G-d is willing to be so nice to? The Rokeach has a brilliant explanation. *We* are all Ephraim, for we all come from Avraham, Yitzhak and Yaakov, who were all humble as *Efer*, as ashes. What does it mean, humility, like ashes? Ashes come from a powerful tree, from a powerful past. Now, they are ashes. We all have it in our genes the ability to be like ashes, the ability to put our inflated ego aside, our limitations of pride, of honor, of fear of shame, for a greater purpose. That is how G-d perceives us; this is why G-d loves us, for we are His people of “full-throttle humility” for we are willing to make ourselves as insignificant as ashes.

As I wrote this article, I got tapped on the shoulder. It was my son who came back from school. “Abba, do you know that your son stole from you?” No. It is not fair for me to hear you say this about your brother, if he is not here. So, we walked over to his brother, the “thief,” who was sitting on the floor in his room, playing Playmobil. “Abba, he took, the Playmobil sword that was part of a set that you bought for the whole family, not just for him, which means, theoretically, that he stole from *you*. I want it too, but he is not letting me play with it, because *he* is playing with it.

I stepped down to the son who called the other son a thief. “Tzaddik! I do not remember where that sword is from. And your brother claims that it is from a Playmobil that I bought for him. I dare you

to ask him nicely to let you play with it! Do you think you could be strong enough to ask him nicely? I am sure then, that he could find in his heart the strength to let you play with it, even though he thinks it is his, once he sees how strong you are in being able to ask nicely for what you think belongs to you.”

I do not know if, at my age, I am much better than my child. At that young age, we fight about Playmobil type stuff. And at older ages, as we get bigger, the stuff we fight about also gets bigger, like positions of honor, rights, pride. I do not know if you or I will be able to do full *Teshuva* before Yom Kippur. It doesn't really matter. The main thing is that you did *some Teshuva*, because that means that you humbled yourself, which means you realized that you could have been more, and you have much more to go, and you have much more to let go of. Humility, *Efer*, is what *Teshuva* is all about, and the more you become *Efer*, the higher level of *Teshuva* you have reached. (Kad Hakemach Rosh Hashana A)

Every year at the Mikveh before Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur I have this crazy thought. We all start from nothing; we are all created the same. I do not deserve to have more, or be more, than anybody else in the Mikveh. Whatever “more” I was given

How do I live life full throttle?

Here are the Selfie Steps. The self-help steps that will give you endless energy.

1. Every day of your life, dare yourself to do something you never thought you could do before, in every area of life. Spiritual goals. Business goals. Family quality time goals. Health Goals. Relationship goals.

by G-d means that I am held “to give more.” (Iggeret Haramban) I could have been born into that other person's shoes, that other person's clothes, that other person's family, Yetzer Hara, facial features, that other person's horoscope, and only G-d knows what else that person is dealing with. How haughty to think otherwise, and to be judgmental! And when you strip yourself of your inflated ego, you can literally be disconnected from your sins, as your faulty behavior was just part of your inflated ego that you took off before immersing. Now you can come to Yom Kippur with your sins in your hands and say to G-d, I did it! I lived life full-throttle! Now, G-d! Show the world how great You are, and let your mercy go full throttle!

I dare you. I dare you to respect the person who is different, to speak nicely to the person you think stole your Playmobil, pride, or is a clash to your personality. I dare you to stop being judgmental. I dare you to accept all that G-d gave you, and accept all that G-d did not give you. I dare you to dare yourself every day, to live your life to its fullest. And I promise you. Once you do, G-d in His endless Mercy will bestow you with such energy, you will not believe that you are actually you.

2. Ask yourself – what do you gain by not living life full throttle? What type of an amazing life are you losing out by not pushing through your self-imposed limitations? In spiritual. Business. Family. Health. Relationships.

Pray to G-d. Ask Him that His endless mercy outweigh His judgment. Ask Him to grant you the courage and strength to change the things that you *can* change in life.

## THE MEANING OF TESHUVA

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? 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 descendents 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* – “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.

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 וחסידיים – 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 לא 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

## THE WORLD'S GREATEST SMUGGLER

At the Shabbat table, my 10-year-old boy tells me Israeli jokes. He cracks up every time. But there are two jokes that I will not forget. Here is one of them...

*An Israeli soldier stood guard at the Israel – Jordan border. He had the early morning shift. His job was to thwart attempts at illegal entry and to prevent smuggling of drugs, weapons, and the like. One day, an old Arab with a friendly smile pulled up in a shiny, clean tractor. The tractor's shovel was filled with sand. The Israeli soldier stared at it suspiciously. "Odd. Don't we have enough sand in Israel? For sure, this guy has drugs in the sand," he thought to himself. "Halt! Sir, empty out all your sand and flatten it to the ground!" The Arab said he did not see what the problem was. "No excuses, sir." The Arab emptied out all the sand. Clean, fine sand. That's all. The Israeli soldier double-checked, examined the papers, scratched his head, and then sent the Arab on his way. The next morning, the whole scene was repeated. "Oh, he thinks that if I check the sand every day and find it clean, eventually, I will stop checking ... and then he will be able to smuggle drugs inside the sand.... "Halt! Sir, empty it out! I am going to check your sand every day! You will not bring it in without it being thoroughly searched." When his meticulous checking turned*

*up nothing, the soldier let him go. This happened every day for a month. Eventually, the two became somewhat friendly.*

*The Israeli soldier could not figure it out. He got curious as to why this Arab was bringing clean sand into Israel each morning. So, the next time, he called the friendly Arab out and offered him a cigarette. As he lit up, the soldier asked the Arab, "Tell me, you look like a smart guy. You come every day with the sand. Do Israelis really need sand from Jordan?"*

*The Arab took a deep puff. He looked to the right. He looked to the left. No one was around at this hour to hear the conversation. He whispered to the soldier, "I tell you. But you tell nobody. I am not smuggling sand. I am smuggling tractors."*

And here is the second.... In Ben Gurion Airport, there are two customs entries into Israel – red and green. Green means that the traveler has nothing to declare. Red means you have something for which you would like to pay customs. *A man in the attire of a religious Jew made his way to the green lane, schlepping with him five refrigerators. The secular customs control officer did not like what he saw. Who needs five refrigerators for personal use? This man must be smuggling in refrigerators. "Sir, I need to ask you, where do you*



think you are going with those?" The religious fellow smiled and started to explain. "As you see, I am a religious man. The Halacha says that we cannot have meat and milk together. I am ultra-religious, and I have two refrigerators at home, one for meat and one for dairy. This way, for sure they won't mix." The custom patrol officer put his hands on his hips. "And what about the other 3?" The religious fellow smiled. "Oh, didn't you ever hear of Passover? We religious Jews are very particular to keep chametz away from our Passover foods. I need two fridges for Passover, as well: one for meat and one for milk. "The officer rolled his eyes. "Sir, and what about the fifth refrigerator?" The religious looking traveler snapped back at him – "Oh, come on. Are you really going to make a big deal because of just one refrigerator?"

Time is limited between now and the end of these Days of Repentance. Many Jews are looking to do *Teshuva* in the time that is left. We search and search for what to repent on, for what to change in our lives, but many times do not see what it is that can or should be changed. In reality, the underlying problem many of us face is that in order to do *Teshuva*, one needs awareness. Awareness of our actions. And awareness of how much the Evil Inclination has affected our decisions. The Yetzer Hara always finds a way to get us to let the big things pass inspection. He gets all manner of transgressions past our "check point", past our standards and past the inspection of right and wrong. Past what we believe in. And worst of all, in order for our Evil Inclination to complete his trap, he diverts our attention away from the most central, essential issues. **He tries to smuggle anti-Torah beliefs over the border of our good judgment.** He tries to insinuate into our thoughts that **if we have sinned, just one more won't make that much of a difference...**

For instance. G-d waits during these days for his children to repent. His greatest will is that we enjoy serving Him. Our souls came here for that purpose. One day, to achieve enjoying serving G-d. These are fundamental tenets of our religion... Serving G-d means living as a Jew is supposed to live. Praying, as a Jew is supposed to pray.

Believing, as a Jew is supposed to believe. These are the fundamentals of being a Jew... The Yetzer Hara concentrates his fight on the fundamentals: he fights until Jewish identity is lost. He fights to alter our beliefs and to get us to accept his beliefs, beliefs such as: "Studying Torah daily is not for me." Or, "The rabbis do not understand the people or the times... I am not good at the religion thing... If I have sinned, then G-d looks at me as if I am a permanent sinner... G-d expects too much, so I will only do what works in with my lifestyle... G-d has favorites - all those who are successful..." It is these beliefs and the like that the Evil Inclination wants to make part of our psyche. And they are more dangerous than the sins that he may or may not get us to do. They define the identity of a person and his belief system and have the greatest effect on one's life decisions. And they are the big wins of the Evil Inclination.

The *passuk* says **יעזוב רשע דרכו ואיש און מחשבותיו** the wicked shall abandon his ways, and a strong-minded man (shall leave) his thoughts. The *passuk* here is describing two types of *Teshuva*: *Teshuva* from sin and evil ways, and *Teshuva* from thoughts and beliefs that are invalid – those that are against Torah principles and therefore, also against the truth. For example, says R' Ovadia Yosef, *zt"l*, a person who thinks, even for a minute, that learning Torah is not saving the world, that learning Torah is not keeping our nation alive must do *Teshuva* for such thoughts. For this goes against the teachings of our Rabbis, **אם לא בריתי יומם ולילה חוקות שמים** וארץ לא שמתי. *This is one of the fundamental thoughts and beliefs which are of paramount importance, because they determine the way we are going to feel and behave.* All G-d wants from is our attempt to change for the better; all He wants is for us to become what a "Jew" is supposed to be. And being a Jew is not genetic alone. It is a way of life, a belief system and a system of values....

The ways of the Yetzer Hara can only be seen "out of the box" – they can be recognized only when presented totally out of context. And that is why I needed to bring you a "*mashal*" like that of the tractor or that of the fellow with the fridges. The worst belief that the Yetzer Hara can persuade you to accept during these days is: *Why try to get*

*better, if I will probably fall again? Why be wishy-washy? Try and be more religious and then fall again? Just be straight, consistent and don't try any more. I have already tried so many times to get better, and I just cannot make it. If I give up trying to get better, I will stop failing and be happier, as I accept myself for who I am. You failed so much, don't make a big deal of just one more failure, one more day of leaving everything status quo...*

This is the worst belief of all, *the worst tractor*, because it sounds like a legitimate claim. But in reality, it is not that way. *Teshuva* is just so simple;

### YOM KIPPUR AND JIBEL MONTER

One day this summer, my boys and I went for a jeep ride in the Judean Desert. Our driver/guide brought us to a mountain peak the Arabs call “Jibel Monter” (Mt. Monter). We got out, and the guide pointed to Mt. Scopus in the distance. He said that, according to many, we were standing on the very mountain so central to the *avodah* of Yom Kippur – the mountain from which the goat was flipped backwards to “Azazel” during Temple times. It was a clear day, and I turned to see the magnificent view of Jerusalem, and turned again to the jagged cliff below. As I looked down the cliff and then up to see the other mountains that tower over the beautiful view of the Dead Sea, I could not keep my eyes off the drop. I wondered out loud to our guide: “Wouldn't this place be a great place for zip lining or bungee jumping?” I could just see the advertisement: *Face Satan, and jump off Azazel Peak!* The guide quickly put this wild idea to rest. He told me that even non-religious people feel some type of trepidation regarding this mountain, and would not use this serious place for entertainment.

I proceeded to ask our guide if this spot attracts tourists. He replied, ironically, “In a few weeks, the summer break starts for the *chareidi* community. This becomes a busy tourist stop for all the jeeps in this area of the desert. Every fifteen minutes, there is another *minyán* out here for *minchah*.” In the meantime, though, we were the only people in sight. I took another breath as an eerie feeling crept through my bones.

\*

it is so beautiful. It is for everyone, and every day makes a difference. Because the call for *Teshuva* does not mean to take on challenges that you have been unable to meet year after year. Instead, try something small... very, very small... and achievable. Last year, I tried to take upon myself smiling more at people. That's all. Just smiling. Of course, I was not smiling all the time. But I am happy that I tried. Because I know that is all G-d wants from us, to try. Not even to try our hardest. Just to try... That's one of the things that a Jew is all about.

The Rambam writes that in Temple times, the goat sent to Azazel serves as an atonement for all our sins including the intentional ones – even sins punishable by death. To atone for the gravest sins, one needs repentance as well, but for the lighter sins, only the goat is needed. No sacrifice brought in the Temple has the power to atone for intentional sins as does the power of the Azazel goat.

What is the idea of tossing the goat who lost the lottery down the cliff to smithereens? Indeed, what is the origin of the name “Azazel”? If it is a name of Satan, as some commentators explain, isn't there a prohibition against bringing a sacrifice to Satan? How can this purify us from our sins?

As I stood there, these questions ran through my mind. As you will see from the sampling below, our Torah commentators, both past and present, have addressed these questions. R' Shimshon Pincus *zt"l*, for example, emphasizes that we should not understand that the goat was meant as a “present” or “bribe” to Satan (or Evil Inclination). Once you give this character a finger, he takes the entire hand. The concept of *Azazel* is entirely different. According to the Zohar (*Emor*) and the Midrash (*Toldot*), Azazel, Satan, and Esav are related. Sending the goat to Azazel is meant as a statement that the Evil Inclination and Esav's ways caused us to sin. We do not want anything to do with them. The *Beis Halevi* (*Drush 3*) writes that we are symbolically giving Esav a bit of our merits on Yom Kippur as payment for using and benefiting from his material world (given to him by

Yitzchak). G-d converts this payment into all the riches and power that Esav gets each year. Symbolically, we are declaring that the world-to-come has supreme value in our eyes, and that this world is just temporary. This alone atones for all our sins.

During the year, we sometimes commit sins that we feel are a reflection of the real “us” – as if the sinful act is part of our nature or DNA. This is a terrible mistake! It’s almost as if we were to look in a mirror with a massive wart drawn on it, and say, “I hate the way I look.” Although we may have caused the problem, we are not the problem. Some people get so mad at themselves that they want to break the mirror. But, of course, that does not help either. We will always be stuck with who we are. Some people would prefer to move to another mirror, and be happy to see that the wart is gone. Clearly, though, the best approach is to wipe the mirror clean. And this was achieved through the goat of Azazel and the special power of Yom Kippur. On this day, by separating from worldly things and acting like angels, we try to show G-d that this is actually our true identity and nature all year long.

The blood of the goat is closest in color to that of human blood. (That is why Yosef’s brothers showed their father Yosef’s coat dipped in goat blood when they wanted to convince him that the boy had been killed by an animal.) This can help us understand the symbolism of using two similar goats in the Yom Kippur *avodah*. Despite their outward similarity, the goats went in two completely different directions: one sent to the wilderness of Azazel and the other sacrificed to G-d on the Altar in the Temple. Symbolically, we are demonstrating that a distinction and separation is possible for us as well. If we will direct our thoughts and fully align ourselves with HaShem, then the sinful part of our being and personality can be sent away as if it were not part of us. Even if it looked as if G-d’s priorities were not at the top of our list, this was due to the influence that Esav put in the world. As the Sages so eloquently put it: “*Master of the Universe! It is well known to You that our will is to do Yours, but what is stopping us is the leaven in the dough and the nations.*” ריבון העולמים, גלוי וידוע לפניך שברצוננו לעשות רצונך, ומי מעכב? שאור שבעיסה ושעבוד מלכויות (Berachot 17a). Our natural, true identity is לשם “for G-d.”

## SHORTCUT TO FORGIVENESS

Not many hours lie between us and the sealing of our fate for the upcoming year. We cannot afford to waste time. This situation causes pressure for many of us. How are we going to complete our “teshuvah agenda” by Yom Kippur?

Our Rabbis teach that there is a kind of shortcut: כל המעביר על מדותיו מעבירין לו על כל פשעיו. Loosely translated, this means: *If a person overlooks his natural tendencies (middot) and forgives those who have wronged him, G-d will overlook all of his sins (Rosh Hashanah 17a).* G-d is willing to judge us the way we judge others. If we treat others strictly, that is how G-d will treat us as well. This is not a punishment. Rather, it is the most precise way of executing justice. Each person’s actions are judged in accordance with that person’s perception and standards. (Interestingly, this can result in a situation where two people with identical merits and sins get entirely different judgments.)

But it’s not quite that simple. As Rav Chaim Friedlander reminds us, this “shortcut” is not available to one who forgives those over whom he/she has no power. It is reserved for the person who has power over the one who wronged him – such as an employer or teacher vis-à-vis an employee or student – but grants forgiveness anyway. When a powerless person turns a blind eye to the one who has wronged him, this does not qualify as overlooking one’s natural tendencies. Allow me to elaborate.

Anger, for example, is a place where one’s *middot* (natural tendencies and character traits) are clearly visible. Why do we get angry? It usually stems from the feeling that someone stepped on us or our principles. And that is exactly how we are measured! How much we can forgive and how much we can overlook. This may be the reason why the word *middot* also means measures.

Upon becoming angry one reveals where the limits of his/her endurance are. Through one's *middot* one can reveal the limits of spiritual growth that can be achieved as well.

Taking control of our *middot* is so important because they not only led to our past misbehavior, but they also dictate how we will act in any given situation in the future. That is why we are judged on our *middot* on Yom Kippur, and that is why Hashem grants atonement to one who overcomes anger. Such a person has overcome his *middot* and essentially become a different person. For him or her, past misbehavior is no longer a sure indication of future misbehavior.

The Satan testifies on Yom Kippur that the Jews are angelic for overcoming anger and letting bygones be bygones. For if we can learn to understand and accept, we are displaying angelic behavior. We are no longer judged by the pettiness of our own "rules and regulations."

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The days between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur are a time when G-d is especially close to us, and when it is easy to call out to Him: דרשו ה' בהמצאו קראוהו בהיותו קרוב Where exactly do we find G-d? The Baal Shem Tov offers a Chassidic approach based on the *passuk*, שויתי ה' לנגדי תמיד (*I place G-d before me at all times*). The term לנגדי (*before me*) can also mean *opposite me*. G-d is to be found opposite you, in your "opponent" – the person whom you feel is the hardest person in your life to deal with. G-d put the annoyance in your life to see how you deal with it. And He is right there taking notes.

## THE ART OF CONNECTING TO R' AKIVA

A popular parasha sheet in Israel wrote something that got me thinking.

People go to R' Shimon Bar Yochai to pray for miracles, borrowing an unrelated terminology from the Talmud, כדאי הוא ר"ש לסמוך עליו בשעת הדחק. (Gittin 19a) It is true. People have seen miracles after praying at the Tomb of R' Shimon in Meron, and the Talmud tells us that R' Shimon was

This is the secret of the *Selichot* prayers and the repetition of the Thirteen Divine Attributes. The repetition is intended to help us internalize the awareness that the greatness of G-d lies in His finding a way to forgive us. Our obligation is to emulate Him and His Attributes of Mercy. As one Rabbi put it, G-d sends us annoyances to overlook so that we can understand His greatness in overlooking our sins.

This may be the secret of the mikveh as well. It is customary to immerse oneself in the mikveh on Erev Yom Kippur. There is an old saying: Although sadness is not a sin, it can take the person further from G-d than the worst sin. And there is a similar Chassidic saying about the mikveh. Although immersing oneself in the mikveh is not a mitzvah, it can bring one closer to G-d than the greatest mitzvah. The mikveh has the *segulah* to be able to help one refrain from anger. The numerical value of mikveh (מקוה) is 151, and is almost identical to the numerical value of כעס (*anger*). What is the connection?

The mikveh is a place where one purifies oneself, but this can only be achieved if one is entirely immersed in water. Any separation between the skin and the water disqualifies the immersion. According to Halachah, though, only something that one is particular about not being on the skin is considered a separation. On the symbolic level, then, the mikveh teaches a person not to get hung up or angry about the things that could cause division between himself and others. There is no separation: I am selfless. This is the shortcut to atonement on Yom Kippur.

accustomed to performing miracles, seeing miracles, and having miracles in his life. (Meilah 17) But people don't go nearly as much to visit the grave of R' Akiva in Tiberias, as they go to visit the grave of R' Shimon in Meron, even though R' Akiva was R' Shimon's teacher.

After R' Akiva lost his 24,000 students, he did not give up. He restarted with just five: those five are



the source of all the Oral Torah that we have today. R' Meir is all the Stam Tana of all the Mishna; Rabbi Nechamia is the Stam Tanah of Tosefta; Rabbi Yehuda is the Stam Tana of Sifra; R' Shimon is the Stam Tana of Sifri, and *all of what they taught was what they learned from R' Akiva!*

When R' Shimon told his students to learn from him, he said, "My sons, learn my Torah teachings, because my Torah lessons are a minute fraction of the finest of the finest of the teachings of R' Akiva." (Gittin 67a) R' Shimon authored not only the Zohar and Sifri, but also the Mechilta. All of this was just a "minute fraction" of the Torah he learned from R' Akiva.

If that is the case, why don't we visit R' Akiva's grave, at least as much as we visit R' Shimon? Similarly, the author asked, why don't we visit Yaakov Avinu's grave in Ma'arat Hamachpela, as much as we visit Rachel Imenu?

The answer the author gave is interesting, but incorrect. The author explained that people go to R' Shimon, to Rachel Imenu, because they want solutions to their life-problems. They don't know how to, and don't want to live with their life's problems. People want miracles and are not prepared to make the effort to build themselves through the difficulties life throws at them. Rabbi Akiva was known for going through life difficulties and accepting them with love, and positivity, not for making miracles to solve problems. Yaakov Avinu lived a life of difficulty, and he tried to accept and deal with the circumstances. Rachel, on the other hand, demanded miracles from her husband, to be a mother of a child. So, when people have problems, they don't go to R' Akiva and to Yaakov Avinu, because they were known for acceptance, and people don't want to accept. People want miracles and solutions, so they would rather go to R' Shimon and Rachel, hoping the problems will somehow either disappear or end themselves.

I brought this idea to my Rabbi, and he said, Has Veshalom! The reason why we go to R' Shimon is because R' Akiva was on such a high level that we can gain from his Torah only through his students; so people visit the graves of R' Shimon and R'

Meir ba'al Hanes, both R' Akiva's students. But R' Akiva, himself, is on too high a level for us to be able to connect to his Torah, alone and directly. Also, we know that the greatest Rabbis – Rabeinu Ovadia Bartanura, the Bet Yosef, the Ramak, the Arizal, the Ohr Hachaim and the Shlah – made a "big deal" of their visit to R' Shimon, even though those Rabbis, themselves, were not people who looked for easy lives. But the celebration of Lag Ba'omer is the celebration not of R' Shimon, alone, but of the Torah of R' Akiva. That is why we sing the song of אמר רבי עקיבא אשריכם ישראל, on Lag Ba'omer.

The reason why we go to Rachel Imenu is because, as Yaakov told his son Yosef, G-d wanted her grave to be positioned on the side of the road, at the entrance to Jerusalem, for people to pray there. (Bereshit 48:7) She cries for her children; she is the mother of the Jewish people, as she cries a special tear for each Jew. רחל מבכה על-בניה מֵאָנָה לְהַנְתָּם עַל-בְּנֵיהֶּם כִּי אֵינְנֵנוּ *She refuses to be consoled for her sons, for he is not present (in Israel).* This phrase begins with plural, and ends in singular. Rachel's merit, because of which that G-d never turns down her requests, is her having overcome jealousy and her having given in to her sister, which ultimately brought about the birth of all 12 tribes. Yosef, her son, was the first to pray at her grave, as he had been sold as a slave and was on his way down to Egypt. (Sefer Hayashar) The Vilna Gaon (Tikunei Zohar 6 22a) writes that when there are no Tzaddikim in a particular generation, the Shechina, G-d's Presence, is found by the graves of the Tzaddikim, especially by the tomb of Rachel Imenu; that there is the main place where the Shechina resides. The Leshem explains that for this reason, David Hamelech was anointed in Beit Lechem, for the Shechina is there.

Although we can't connect to R' Akiva's Oral Torah without the conduit of his students, we can all learn from R' Akiva's life and struggles, and how he dealt with them. Every story of R' Akiva is a story of ultimate positivity and optimism. Optimism is broken down to three Ps. Not taking things Personally, recognizing that problems are not Permanent, and problems are neither Pervasive

nor worse than they actually are. These messages are interwoven in every story about Rabbi Akiva.

We know the stories. When he passed some water dripping slowly, but constantly, on a rock and saw that the water had made a hole in it, R' Akiva realized that *if water, with its continuous dripping, can make a hole in the stone, for sure, constant "drops" of Torah learning can make an impact on my mind.* (Avot DR Natan 6 2) Being dumb, ignorant, is not a permanent problem. It is temporary, as long as you are consistent in learning Torah. When he was lying in the barn on the hay with his new wife, Rachel, pulling out the straw from her hair, he said, "If and when I have the money for it, I will get you the head ornament, Yerushalayim Shel Zahav, that you deserve. (Nedarim 51 a) Poverty is temporary, and it is just a mindset. R' Akiva said that a rich person is not one who has great wealth in the bank, but one who is rich in his essence. *Rabbi Akiva said, Who is a rich man? A man who has a wife with good character.* )Shabbat 25b) A person is rich, not if he has what he needs, but if he feels so replete with goodness that he can give to others. When Eliyahu Hanavi appeared as a poor man and knocked on the barn door, he said, "My wife just gave birth and we are so poor, we don't have even hay to cover her. Do you have any hay you can give us?" R' Akiva and Rachel immediately gave him some hay, and when the man left, R' Akiva tells Rachel, "You see, there are people who don't even have any hay! At least we have hay!"

Ever wonder why Eliyahu Hanavi did not just come and give them a two-million-dollar diamond, or at least warm blankets, and some comfy pillows? The answer is that *you do more for a person, when you give him an opportunity to give, then when you give the person the opportunity to take.*

The story of R' Akiva with the rooster, lamp, and donkey is a story of ultimate positive thinking, the certainty that when G-d takes things from you, it is only because He has your good in mind. (Berachot 60b) The story of R' Akiva, when he was with other Rabbis who were crying when they saw the site of the Destruction of the Temple, and foxes were walking over the place of the Holy of Holies,

while R' Akiva was laughing, saying that if the prophecy of destruction came true, for sure the prophecy of the Final Redemption will come true as well, is a perfect example of acknowledging that the present is not permanent. (Makkot 24b)

The story of how his wife encouraged him, saying that, although in the beginning, people will laugh at you that at your age, you're coming to learn the basics with little children in school; but eventually, they will get used to it, and eventually you will surely see your learning blossom and the fruits of your labor. She walked with him in the market place, with a plant growing on the back of a donkey, hinting that there can be growth anywhere, and in the most bizarre and unexpected places. The people laughed at them on the first day, the second day; but on the third day, they got used to it. Midrash Hagadol Shemot 24; 13)

When Rabbi Akiva, Ben Azai, Acher and Ben Zoma went to Pardes, only Rabbi Akiva came out of there sane, because he believed that if the wicked are repaid with good, so much more so, will the tzaddikim receive good in the next world. (Hagigah 14b, Makkot 24a)

R' Akiva was even able to make his horrible death into a positive story. He did not *just die*. He said he had waited his whole life for the day when he would have the opportunity to die for G-d, to love G-d with all his soul, בכל נפשו, and, now, at the hour of his death, his wish was being answered.

Rabbi Akiva, himself, was in jail and suffered from the first day of Elul until he died on Yom Kippur. This is why we say, during the Kol Nidrei, the passuk in Tehillim, אִוֵּר נִרְעֵ לְצַדִּיק וְלִישְׁרֵי־לֵב שֶׁמָּהָה, because the last letters of this passuk, spell the letters of his name, R' Akiva. The passuk that has his name hidden in it is also the passuk of positivity. *Light is sown for the Tzaddik, and for those that are straightforward, they have happiness (in the present).*

And this is the reason why it is a basic part of the day of Yom Kippur and the days leading up to Yom Kippur that we pray R' Akiva's prayer, Avinu Malkeinu. He was murdered by the Romans, who peeled the flesh off his body with

metal forks. How could R' Akiva look forward to such cruelty?

R' Akiva was the tenth of the great Rabbis who were killed by the Romans. His death was the harshest death of all the ten Rabbis who were killed by the Romans, as his Rabbi, Rabbi Eliezer ben Hurkenas, foretold. The reason: because there was some more Torah R' Akiva could have learned from R' Eliezer, that he did not. (Sanhedrin 68a) This teaches us that a person is held responsible for what he *could* do. In spiritual matters, you are held accountable for what you *could* do.

The reason why R' Akiva died such a death, at the age 119, was because the Tribes kidnapped Yosef and sold him, something that the Torah punishes by death. We, their descendants, who still did not learn to love our brother and her his plea in times of need, still pray for atonement for this at the height of our High Holiday prayers, every Yom Kippur, כי אתה סלחן לישראל ומחלן לשבטי ישורון. There were only 9 brothers who were part of the sale, but the tribes got G-d to be the tenth and join in the decision to sell Yosef. So, G-d, Himself, who was the number 10, needed a Kaparah as well, and R' Akiva, who was the tenth, had his death as the Kaparah for G-d.

That is the way he lived his life, with the purest intentions of serving G-d, ready at every moment to give up everything for G-d. This purity is R' Akiva's song that we sing on Lag Ba'omer, a song of how we serve G-d in purity. אמר רבי עקיבא אשריכם ישראל לפני מי אתם מטהרין ומי ומטהר אתכם, אביכם שבשמים. This is why R' Akiva was so particular in keeping the mitzvah of Netilat Yadaim, even risking his life for it, when he was in jail. (Eruvin 21b)

This purity, to do everything we do exclusively for G-d's sake, is what we need to work on during the Sefirat Ha'omer, to get us ready for Shavuot, receiving the Torah, which is the Chupah between G-d and the Jewish People. (Taanit 4:8) וטהר לבנו The Sefirat Ha'omer is the ultimate purification process of 7 times 7, and it starts from Pesach, which is like the Kiddushin. Ridding ourselves of Chametz is the start of the purification process, as it is putting a stop to the Yetzer Hara. This explains why the Torah refers to first day of Pesach, ממחרת השבת, because the word *Shabbat* means to cease, stop. We are to begin the 49-day purification after we purify ourselves, after putting an end to the Yetzer Hara. And the way to do this is to think, every day, how we are ready to give everything we have, for G-d. Just like R' Akiva lived his life.

## A REFUND ON TIME

The days in which we presently find ourselves are days in which we all look for merits. However, R. Y. T. Salant, in *B'er Yosef*, helps us understand something about this from the famous story of R' Preida. (Eiruvim 54b) The Talmud begins with the *passuk* in our Parasha: ועתה כתבו לכם את השירה הזאת R' Akiva learns from here that it is the responsibility of the teacher to make sure that the student comprehend the lesson and be able to repeat what the teacher said in his own words.

*R' Preida had a student that would comprehend Torah concepts only after he was explained four hundred times. Once, in the middle of the four hundred times, R' Preida was invited to come to a Simcha that was to take place that evening. After*

*the person delivering the invitation left, R' Preida finished the expected four hundred times. Still, the student did not comprehend. R' Preida asked what was different this time. The answer he got was, "The moment that the messenger invited you, I lost my focus. And then, after he left, I kept thinking that R' Preida would get up any minute to go to the Simcha." R' Preida responded, "Pay attention, and I will teach it to you again." He taught him another four hundred times. And then a Heavenly Voice came out and said to R' Preida, "Would you rather have another four hundred years of life, or that you and your generation merit the World to Come?" R' Preida answered that he chose option B. G-d responded, "Give him both!"*

Why did G-d give R' Preida both options, just because he chose option B? To pick the next world over a long life in this world is a no-brainer. Why then would R' Preida be rewarded so generously for his answer?

The answer is that R' Preida was on the level of wanting additional time in This World in order to serve Hashem more and more. He realized that every minute in This World was so much greater than all the pleasures of the Next World, where there are no more mitzvot.

Still, R' Preida chose that he *and his generation* merit the Next World, passing up opportunity for his own growth (via long life) for the sake of his whole generation. And because he

preferred bringing merit for the people over his own merit and personal spiritual growth, he was given a double reward. G-d did not let R' Preida lose out personally because of his sacrifice for other people.

When we do not have a lot of time, and we wish we had more of it, there is nothing better to do than to bring merit to the *tzibbur*. When we are hearing someone out, and he is taking a long time, don't rush him. G-d will give you a refund on that time. When we are in the *Asseret Yemei Teshuva* and we do not know how to squeeze the maximum out of the time we have, the best advice is to look around and see where we can cause more merit for Klal Yisrael.

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