

# JUDGING FAIRLY PART 4

*by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen*

We have thus far covered most of the laws with regard to interpreting the actions of people. The Gemara in Brachos discusses one final aspect of this command; it acknowledges that there may be occasions where it is completely impossible to judge even a righteous man favorably and one is allowed to presume that he did indeed commit a sin. Nonetheless, the law is that we must presume that he regretted his sin and did teshuva by the next day (repented<sup>1</sup>)<sup>2</sup>.

How can we be so certain that this righteous man did teshuva so quickly? The answer is found in a basic principle in the Torah's attitude to growth - that a person should be in a constant process of self-accounting (cheshbon hanefesh), assessing his actions of the previous day. We can be certain that a righteous person undergoes this daily self-accounting and in this time of honestly analyzing his actions, will come to the realization that he erred and do teshuva for his action.

This idea of cheshbon hanefesh can appear as quite a novel concept - Western society does not place great emphasis on the importance of analyzing one's actions and character traits as a tool for self-improvement. There is the concept of assessing one's business results and one's financial situation, but in the realm of self-growth, this is a far less familiar approach<sup>3</sup>. It seems likely that one of the primary causes of the high divorce rate is the attitude that 'I' am in the right, but the other person is wrong and should be the one trying to improve ourselves. In contrast, the Torah approach stresses that we should focus more on our own performance in the relationship and less on that of our spouse.

The first stage of cheshbon hanefesh is to get to know oneself. This involves developing a familiarity with one's character traits, both positive and negative. Without such self-awareness a person cannot begin to improve himself. A good way of doing this is writing a list of the main character traits and assessing where one's strengths and weaknesses lie. Another tool to help us realize what area of growth we should focus on is to note the areas of contention in one's relationships. For example, if the main point of contention in a marriage is that one has a short temper, then it is likely that this is the most important area of self-growth.

We have seen how cheshbon hanefesh is so engrained in Jewish thought to the extent that we can be certain that a righteous person who erred will assess his actions and do teshuva.

<sup>1</sup> In truth, the word 'repent' is not an adequate translation of the Hebrew word, 'teshuva' - a better

translation is, 'returning' - teshuva signifies that a person has 'returned' to Hashem after distancing himself from Him through negative actions.

<sup>2</sup> Brachos, 19a.

<sup>3</sup> It is true that there are a number of self-help books that sometimes contain aspects of self-assessment - however they are limited and their motivation is often to enable someone to do better in business, not necessarily to become a better person.

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