

# THE SECRET OF TESHUVAH

by Shlomo Katz

## Parshas Netzavim

## The Secret of Teshuvah

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There are two holidays mentioned in the Torah whose primary significance is not described there. Nowhere in the Torah is Rosh Hashanah described as the Day of Judgment. Likewise, Shavuot is not referred to in the Torah as the holiday of the Giving of the Torah. Why?

R' Shlomo Ephraim z"l of Lunschitz (17th century; author of the Torah commentary Kli Yakar) answers by noting that there are two other dates that are hidden as well: the date of one's eventual death and the date of the arrival of mashiach. The reason for all of these is the same, says R' Shlomo Ephraim. Being in doubt forces us to think differently. Not knowing the date of the Giving of the Torah allows us to feel every day as if the Torah is new. Not knowing when mashiach will come can drive us to repent constantly in order to merit his arrival. Not knowing when we will die also can lead us to repent constantly in preparation for the Great Judgment. Finally, not knowing when the Day of Judgment (Rosh Hashanah) is prevents us from sinning all year long, when it is seemingly safe to do so, and planning to repent at the last moment. (Olelot Ephraim II 33)

Of course, we do know when the Day of Judgment (Rosh Hashanah) and the Day of the Giving of the Torah (Shavuot) are because the Oral Tradition teaches us these facts. Perhaps, suggests R' Menachem Simcha Katz shlita (Brooklyn, NY), the Torah is teaching us a second lesson: that without complete loyalty to the Oral Tradition and meticulous adherence to the laws found in it (i.e., in the Talmud), teshuvah is impossible or meaningless. This is alluded to in the blessing of the daily Shemoneh Esrei which speaks of teshuvah: "Return us our Father to Your Torah, draw us close our

King to Your service, and [then] return us in complete repentance before You." (Simcha L'ish p. 406)

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"You will return until Hashem, your Elokim." (30:2)

R' Moshe Zvi Neriya z"l (1913-1995; rosh yeshiva in Kfar Ha'roeh, Israel, and founder of the Bnei Akiva youth movement) wonders: Is this verse referring to a place to which one returns, as the word "until" implies?

He explains: The result of the teshuvah process is that G-d forms man anew. He continues: Teshuvah is remarkable; had Hashem not told us that it is effective, we would never have imagined it on our own. \*Doing\* teshuvah is logical, but that teshuvah is \*accepted\* is not. How can one just erase the past and be born anew?!

Several verses refer to teshuvah using "purification" as a metaphor, for example (Vayikra 16:30) "For on this day he shall provide atonement for you to cleanse you; from all your sins before Hashem shall you be cleansed" and (Yirmiyah 17:13) "Hashem, mikveh of Israel!" This is because we can grasp the concept of purification by analogy to physical cleansing. In turn, this assists us in grasping the cleansing and renewing effect of teshuvah.

With this we can understand as well the "place" to which one returns when he repents. It is not a physical place but rather the "point" from which one was created. (Me'orot Neriya: Elul-Tishrei p.19)

One might think that he is \*obligated\* to sin so that he can fulfill the mitzvah of teshuvah. Otherwise, he might go through his entire life without ever performing this mitzvah.

Not so, says R' Chaim Chizkiyah Medini z"l (author of the halachic encyclopedia Sdei Chemed; died 1904). Rather, just as our Sages say that one who studies the laws of the Temple service is deemed to have performed the service, so one who studies the laws of teshuvah is considered to have performed that mitzvah. Thus, even if one never sins, he still can fulfill the commandment to repent. (Drush B'ma'alat Midat Ha'anavah; reprinted in Ohr Ha'chamah p.338)

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"For this commandment that I command you today - it is not hidden from you and it is not distant." (30:11)

R' Moshe ben Nachman z"l (Ramban; 1194-1270) writes that this refers to the mitzvah of teshuvah.

R' Moshe Zuriel shlita (former Mashgiach Ruchani of Yeshivat Sha'alvim) observes that many people find teshuvah difficult. We all feel as if we generally do what is right. Moreover, our Sages teach us that we should approach the Day of Judgment with the confidence that we will emerge vindicated and triumphant.

Nevertheless, R' Zuriel writes, if we understood the depth of Hashem's judgment, we would not be so complacent. Who can claim that he has not offended his spouse, family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, etc. during the year? Do we realize the seriousness of this sin? Do we repent for it properly?

We are all familiar with the halachah that teshuvah does not atone for a sin against another human being unless the offended person is appeased. We therefore are used to asking our friends, "Do you forgive me?" And, of course, they say, "I forgive you." But do they really forgive us, or are they simply too embarrassed or uncomfortable to tell us that they still feel hurt? Do we take steps to right the wrongs that we have committed, or are we satisfied with a pro forma apology?

Moreover, we forget that appeasing those we have offended is only the first step. We still must appease Hashem when we offend His loved ones. The Gemara relates that a great sage was severely punished because he came home late from yeshiva and caused his wife to shed one tear as she sat by the window watching for him. She would not have wanted him to be punished, but Hashem does not tolerate even a small show of insensitivity from a person of stature. Even the fact that he was preoccupied with Torah study did not save him. True, we are not on the stature of that sage, but our sins are not as subtle either.

Even when a person hurts another with the best of intentions, he is punished. We read at the beginning of Shmuel I that a man named Elkanah had two wives-Peninah and Chana. Peninah had children and Chana did not. Our Sages say that Peninah used to goad Chana to pray for children by asking questions such as, "Have you bathed your children for school today?" Peninah had the best of intentions; she wanted Chana to cry from the depths of her heart so that she too would give birth. And it worked! Nevertheless, Peninah was punished severely.

And who has not offended his parents?! The halachic work Chayei Adam (67:3) writes that even thinking negatively about one's parents is a grave sin about which the Torah says (Devarim 27:16), "Cursed is one who degrades his father or mother."

Therefore, concludes R' Zuriel, let us all realize that we have sinned grievously. Let us ask for forgiveness from those we have offended and from their Father in Heaven. Then we truly will be able to enter Rosh Hashanah with confidence. (Otzrot Ha'Torah p. 664)

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### **From the Haftarah . . .**

"I will rejoice intensely with Hashem, my soul shall exult with my Elokim, for He has dressed me in the raiment of salvation, in a robe of righteousness has He cloaked me, like a bridegroom who dons priestly glory, like a bride who bedecks herself in her jewelry. For as the earth brings forth her growth, and as a garden causes its sowings to grow, so shall my Master, Hashem / Elokim, cause righteousness and praise to grow in the face of all the nations" (Yeshayah 61:10-11)

R' Shlomo Kluger z"l (rabbi of Brody, Galicia; died 1869) commented on these verses in a number of derashot.

In a derashah delivered in 5620 / 1860, he focused on the first verse, which describes how Hashem has dressed us as brides and bridegrooms. R' Kluger explained: Everyone knows that the most beautiful bride and the most handsome bridegroom may not be so pleasing to look at beneath their fancy clothes and make-up. So, too, our repentance on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur may be little more than window dressing. Even so, Hashem takes pride in us as if we are his beautiful bride. This is part of His kindness to us.

In a derashah delivered the following year, R' Kluger focused on the connection between the first and second verses quoted above. He said: The midrash says that we should shave and don clean clothes in anticipation of Rosh Hashanah because we are confident that we will be inscribed for a good year. But can we really be so confident? After all, many righteous people die in any given year!

The answer is that if a righteous person dies at a particular time, that must be what is good for him. Of course, we ordinarily cannot see how that is the case. Nevertheless, as the second verse above tells us, "as the earth brings forth her growth, and as a garden causes its sowings to grow, so shall my Master, Hashem / Elokim, cause righteousness and praise to grow." When a farmer puts seeds in the ground, they must first decay before anything can grow from them. One who knows nothing about agriculture thinks that the farmer is throwing away perfectly good seeds, but we know better. Similarly, what seems bad to us, who do not know Hashem's ways, is actually good.

This is alluded to by the verse's use of the name Hashem / Elokim (i.e., the Name is spelled "yud-keh-vav-keh," but it is pronounced "Elokim"). The Name "Hashem" reflects G-d's Attribute of Mercy, while the Name "Elokim" reflects His Attribute of Justice. In reality, they are one and the same. The first of our verses says as well, "I will rejoice intensely with Hashem, my soul shall exult with my Elokim . . ." The prophet tells us that one who understands can see that the two Names reflect the same G-d. (Kohelet Yaakov: Elul p.265-266)

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The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at **Torah.org** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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