

# THE GREAT ACCOUNTING

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

*It will be that when all these things happen to you – the blessings and the curses...- than you will take it to your heart...and you will return to Hashem...*

Challenged by the ministering angels as to why *Klal Yisrael* does not recite Hallel on Rosh Hashanah, Hashem's retort to them was almost a rebuke. "Can it be that the King sits on the Throne of Judgment, and the Books of the Living and of the Dead lie open before Him, and Yisrael should recite *shirah*?"<sup>[2]</sup>

We can relate to the Book of the Living. That hefty volume exposes many unknown details about people's behavior, all of which is scrutinized and made part of a person's judgment. What need, however, can there be for the back volumes – the Books of the Dead. The entries therein would seem to be limited to those who have already been tried, and whose sentences have already been carried out. Why look at old history?

One approach might be to consider those books as a preemptory argument against an anticipated defense of some of those in the docket. They argue, "Living according to the Torah's prescription is wonderful! It was perfectly suited for those who thrived under fairy-tale conditions, like the generation of the Wilderness, who ate *mohn* for breakfast. Or those who lived in idyllic conditions in the Land, each person on his ancestral homestead. But it is well nigh impossible for us today, in very changed times, to be expected to keep the rules of Shabbos and Yom Tov, and to make daily time to lay *tefillin* and to learn Torah."

Silently addressing this claim, HKBH brings out the Book of the Dead. "Is it really so that previous generations had it so easy? Let's look at the ways some of your forebears remained loyal to Torah. Were their conditions easier to bear? You indeed face many challenges. Would you trade places with those who came before? Did they not deal with even harsher conditions?"

We can explain the Books in an entirely different way as well. The consequences of a person's actions – the good and the bad – are not localized in time. They inevitably spill out far into the future, even beyond the years of that person's life. People learn from the actions of others. Children are affected by the lives of their parents. Each year, as Hashem evaluates the place and performance of all things, He weighs anew the contributions of previous figures. The Books of the Living and the Dead are placed side by side. What continued role do those who have long passed away still play in

events of those in the Books of the Living? What new credit should be assigned to them for the good that they inspired or caused? Similarly, what demerits must now be added to their spiritual ledger sheets?

This just might be the intention of the Mishnah in Avos:<sup>[3]</sup> “Know before Whom you will have to give judgment and accounting.” Judgment refers to the action as it is understood at one instant of time; accounting includes all the consequences, the spill-over effects, the inspiration and imitation that it yields.

Understanding this accounting lends new urgency to the process of *teshuvah* – the subject of our *pesukim*. There is far more that we need to repair, beyond the rebellion against Hashem at the moment that we sinned. We need to ponder the impact that our *aveiros* have had on all those around us – and even beyond, like expanding ripples in a pond.

Beyond the clear need to address our trespass against Hashem, *teshuvah* brings with it other benefits.

Chazal teach that when we stood around Sinai and said *naaseh v'nishmah* / we will do, and we will hear, 120,000 angels descended and placed both a crown on the head of each person and weapons in their hands.

Weapons? Whatever for?

People have tried various arguments to “kill” religion in one fell swoop. One of the most powerful – and wrong – arguments is that humans have no responsibility for their choices, because all of those decisions are determined by factors in a person's nature and nurture. If we are determined – if we have no free-will – there can be no responsibility, and no reward or punishment for our actions.

Sinai provided a strong counter-argument. Six hundred thousand souls had previously shown enormous difference and diversity. Yet, they all accepted the Torah with alacrity. They demonstrated decision-making of the highest order, drawing from a huge reservoir of freedom of choice.

The chant of *naaseh v'nishmah* bestowed on every participant the weapons with which to refute the claims of skeptics that humans are robots, never making real choices through the exercise of some power of free-will. When that power is used properly, it becomes a crown that can be worn proudly. When it is abused, it becomes like a weapon to thwart G-d's commands. Indeed, when the Jews sinned with the golden calf, horribly misusing the gift of free-willed choice, angels returned to strip them of their ornamental crowns.

This is perhaps part of Dovid's paeon to *teshuvah*: “Who forgives all your sins. Who heals all your diseases. Who redeems your life from the pit. Who crowns you with kindness and mercy. Who satiates your ornaments with goodness, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle.”<sup>[4]</sup>

Dovid shows here that curing physical and spiritual maladies are both similar and different. While a person may recover from an illness, he usually retains some scar, some weakness, some residual effect of his malady. Not so the person who sins and does *teshuvah*. He emerges, in a sense, more healthy than before. He emerges from the pit fully redeemed. (While a person thrown into a pit can clean himself off after he emerges, the stench from whatever putrid substance filled the pit will likely never leave his clothing.) People can look cynically upon the one who was a *tzadik* all his life, and attribute his piety to his personality. Not so the person who sinned, and then repented. He demonstrates that his goodness is a product of his own choosing. When the *baal teshuvah* comes back, he is as if crowned with a mark of distinction.

By finding the road back, by choosing to turn his back on sin and return to Hashem, he restores the luster to the crown of free-will, that had been tarnished by the sin of the *eigel*. Once again, he is satiated with the ornaments that he was first given by those angels at Sinai.

1. Based on HaMedrash V'HaMaaseh, Nitzavim, by R. Yechezkel Libshitz zt"l.
2. Rosh Hashanah 32B.
3. Avos 3:1.
4. Tehillim 103:3-5.