

ELUL - THE CONTEXT OF EVILDOING

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Elul - The Context of Evildoing¹

By Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

"Let the wicked one forsake his way and the iniquitous man his thoughts." [2] What makes the sinner wicked, if not his actions and deeds? What should the sinner be asked to forsake, if not his evil actions? Why speak about some nebulous "way" rather than his concrete failings?

The road back for the sinner begins with his abandoning his old way, the way that led him so often to evil. Similarly, he must give up the thoughts - the patterns of thinking and outlooks - that form the backdrop and context of his transgression. This is consistent with a theme of the sefarim ha-kedoshim, that the yetzer hora need not lure a person anew for each aveirah, but simply move a person to its territory and turf, an entire world that is a "place" of easy aveirah.

What is the context of evildoing, this "place" of easy wrongdoing? "See, I have placed before you today the life and the good, and the death and the evil....And you shall choose life so that you and your offspring shall live." [3] Once we can recognize the difference between life and death, do we still need to be urged to choose life?

Indeed we do. Since Hashem wills it that we be given the opportunity to exercise free-will, we must always have competing alternatives. We experience satisfaction in positive building and creating that gives life; there must also be a countervailing pleasure in tearing down and destroying. The yetzer hora can influence a person to enjoy destruction, to find joy in activities that harm him and reactions like anger and tear him apart. Even worse, it can persuade him to enjoy destroying others.

We watch curiously as toddlers seem to delight in breaking things, and do not realize that adults are not entirely different. They, too, enjoy causing havoc and chaos. This carries over to the community as well. We observe nations gleefully dedicated to nothing more than the destruction of other nations, investing enormous energy into the development of greater destructive capacity against the other. Destructiveness has become, as it were, a vital force within human civilization.

Character flaws also populate this background of evildoing. Rambam writes, [4] "Do not say that teshuvah applies only to sins involving action. Just as a person must repent of those, he must also examine his evil traits, and repent of anger and hatred and jealousy and frivolousness and the

pursuit of money and honor and gluttony." This is also implied in the phrase "Let the wicked one forsake his way," rather than his sins. So long as a person has not addressed his flaws of character, he is in the thrall of the yetzer hora even when he does nothing actively wrong. (Yesod Ha-Avodah offers a mashal of a king who seeks to prepare his son for eventual rule, and wishes to best prepare his inner qualities. While the prince is in the company of his father, the son's inner core cannot be discerned. The king sends the prince to a distant part of the realm. There, where the king's authority is present but not overt, the prince's true nature expresses itself. The prince is able to discern his own flaws. Realizing that the day approaches when he will be reunited with his father, the prince prepares for the encounter. He feels within himself that the better the job he does in improving his core qualities, the better he is able to think about and prepare for his future encounters with the king. Yesod Ha-Avodah likens the descent of the soul to this world to the prince sent from the presence of the Father.)

Another component of the landscape of evildoing is tunnel vision regarding the majesty of Creation. Animals walk on all fours. Their long axis runs parallel to the ground; their eyes are often fixed on the ground in front of them. Their world, therefore, is their feeding trough. Man, however, walks erect. He lifts up his head and sees afar. He can see G-d within the fullness of His Creation.

Some people do not escape their animal selves. They, too, live a limited existence. Grown people find it amusing when they watch a young child's attachment to a worthless plaything. If that toy is taken away from the child, he wails as if his world had come to an end. But are adults so different? With what do they preoccupy themselves? What makes them happy? About what do they fritter away valuable time worrying? Are any of those things comparable to the Torah and mitzvos that could gain them eternity? Are adults different from children, or have they merely replaced one kind of toy with another?

Chazal had this in mind when they wrote^[5] "A person does not sin unless a spirit of lunacy enters into him." This lunacy is a worldview in which the trivial and unimportant become his objects of pursuit. (The Saba Kadisha used to say that in every aveirah, the spirit of lunacy and folly accounts for 99% of his decision; concession to the yetzer hora amounts to only the remaining 1%.)

When a person lives with constricted understanding, everything surrounding him is limited and shriveled. His Torah is narrow; it fails to fill the depth and breadth of halachah. His avodah is constricted; he fails to "taste and see that Hashem is good."^[6]

There is a context and backdrop to teshuvah as well. Its most important element is the thirst of the holy spark within each person - the portion of Hashem from Above - for its root and source. The Jewish soul always thirsts for more, each person according to his spiritual level. Only the person whose multiple sins have done severe damage to his personality can be stripped of the emotional longing of the typical Jew. This thirst is what neutralizes the destruction-bent forces within the yetzer hora.

Making use of this teshuvah context follows a discrete pattern. The Tur begins Shulchan Aruch by reminding us how aveiros are committed: "The eye sees, the heart desires, and the limbs complete the action." Teshuvah works similarly. First, a person must turn his eyes upward, and behold Who has created everything. The heart is then aroused, and thirsts for connection with Divinity. The limbs then allow the person to right his course and become a ba'al teshuvah in the active sense.

Part of the context of teshuvah is listening. When the Torah describes national repentance, it writes,[7] "And you will return to Hashem your G-d and listen to His voice." We would have expected the Torah to write "and you will do all that I have commanded you." Instead, the Torah instructs us regarding the first step in teshuvah, after we have moved to a teshuvah context. We first must listen to the sound of Hashem knocking[8] on the walls of our hearts. We must realize, as the Besht taught, that the Heavenly voice which calls us each day to teshuvah[9] may not be heard physically by us, but the neshamah does listen - and takes heed.

In the final analysis, teshuvah depends upon our taking action. Placing our inner selves within the context of teshuvah, inspiring ourselves spiritually and intellectually, and taking pains to hear the voices bidden us return - all these are insufficient. They cannot make us ba'alei teshuvah without concomitant action.

This action does not simply mean distancing ourselves from aveirah. We need to turn the inspiration into individually-tailored action, addressing the core flaws and problems of which we become conscious. The Bais Yosef, for instance, addressed stiff-neckedness not through reflection alone. Realizing the importance of bending his will to that of the Creator, it is said that he loaded rocks upon his shoulders, to physically cause him to bend. This is a perfect example of giving substance to an inner realization by coupling it with action.

[1] Based on Nesivos Shalom vol.1 pg. 209-212 [2] Yeshaya 55:2 [3] Devarim 30: 15, 19 [4] Hilchos Teshuvah 7:3 [5] Sotah 3A [6] Tehilim 34:9 [7] Devarim 30:2 [8] An allusion to Shir Ha-Shirim 5:2 [9] Zohar 3:126A

Text Copyright © 2009 by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein and **Torah.org**