

SOWING THE SEEDS OF TESHUVA

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

These ten days, beginning with the first day of Rosh Hashana and continuing through Yom Kippur, are called the Aseres Yemei Teshuva - The Ten Days of Repentance. Our Sages teach us that on Rosh Hashana the verdict for the New Year is written. It is not sealed, however, until the end of Yom Kippur. Thus, even a harsh decree, G-d forbid, may still be changed between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

In the Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur prayers we read that, "Teshuva (repentance), tefilah (prayer), and tzedakah (charity) annul (even the most) severe decree." In other words, during these days it is especially important that we perform as many mitzvos as possible. Shulchan Aruch (ch. 603) writes that even one who eats (kosher) bread baked by non-Jews all year (known as pas palter - which is permissible under certain circumstances), should during these days only eat bread baked by a Jew. One might question such practices: Certainly we agree that it is important to always be scrupulous in mitzvah performance, but what do we accomplish by being especially careful for these ten days, to the point where we adapt stringencies that we know we are not capable of sustaining throughout the year? Are we, G-d forbid, trying to 'fool' the Almighty by presenting ourselves as being uncharacteristically good?

A person who lived all his life in the big city decided one day to become a farmer. He bought a parcel of land and went to live on a farm. Knowing that whether his land will grow crops or not depends on the mercy of G-d, he prayed fervently to Hashem for rain. His prayers were answered - rain descended on his fields in abundance. Now he was sure that his fields would yield luscious fruits and vegetables. Yet as he checked his fields from day to day, to his dismay he found only weeds. His disappointment became even greater when he saw that all his neighbours' fields were indeed filled with beautiful produce.

In despair, he approached one of his neighbours: "My field had the same amount of rain as yours. My field had the same sunshine as yours. My field is even the same size as yours - yet mine didn't yield any fruit - and yours did! Where did I go wrong?"

"The answer is simple," explained the neighbour. "Hashem blessed us this year with an abundance of rain. But Hashem's blessings are only effective when you do what you have to do. I planted seeds, fertilized the ground, and removed the weeds - so now Hashem's blessing of rain has brought forth wonderful fruits. You didn't do anything for your field. You prayed, but you didn't do anything to cultivate Hashem's blessings. So how can you expect His blessings to bear fruit?"

On Rosh Hashana we ask Hashem to grant us everything we need for the coming year. Hashem accepts our prayers, and "gets busy" preparing a year of beracha (blessing) and hatzlacha (success) and health and prosperity. These blessings are like the rain - Hashem sends them down to the earth to nourish us, both spiritually and materially. The good deeds we perform during the Aseres Yemei Teshuva are the seeds we sow in order for Hashem's blessings to take effect. Once the farmer has sown his seeds and prepared his fields for the coming season, he can, so to speak, "sit back" and allow nature to take its course. The rigorous preparations he made during the critical period of plowing and sowing ensure that all will go well throughout the rest of the year, G-d willing. These days, between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, are when we do our planting, so we are extra-careful to do everything we can to ensure the coming year will "bear fruit" that is healthy and abundant!
[Adapted from Torah Fax]

Sometimes we feel daunted by the magnitude of the task. There is so much in our lives, it seems, that needs fixing, and so little that is already as it should be. Even the little good we do is often tainted with ulterior motives and personal considerations, and not purely for the sake of Heaven. Hopefully, during these days of introspection and self-analysis, we do succeed in making changes in our lives. Yet these changes are small, and they feel insignificant. We do not, overnight, suddenly undergo metamorphosis - as if we are no longer the same people we were before Rosh Hashana. We are discouraged: Are we really accomplishing anything at all?

In the first blessing of the Shemona Esrei prayer, we refer to Hashem as "Konei Ha-kol - He acquires (purchases) everything." Symbolically, this means Hashem created the universe, and is in sole possession of everything in it (notwithstanding what we think). But why do we use the strange formulation "Konei Ha-kol?"

Once a year, a peddler would travel to distant lands where he would spend weeks carefully inspecting different products and materials, and would acquire his wares for the coming year. His funds were limited, and his expectations were high. Only the finest quality materials passed his penetrating eyes and feeling hands. When he visited his suppliers, he spent many hours scrutinizing the different items until he found products he was happy with.

One day, as he stood bent over a collection of various items, in walks a well-dressed businessman looking to make a purchase. Without hesitation, he says to the wholesaler: "Give me that, that, and those - whatever you've got; it makes no difference. Wrap them up for me, and I'll be back to pick them up in five minutes." Five minutes later he returns, takes his bags, and pays for everything with cash. He doesn't even check to see what he received.

The peddler was dumbfounded. What kind of person bought such large quantities without even seeming to care what he got? He had to know. He followed him out of the store. "Tell me," he said, "what kind of businessman are you exactly? You just spent a hefty sum of money, and you didn't even seem to care what you got. For all you know, your bags may be full of the lowest, poorest

quality items!"

"You don't understand," said the stranger. "Let me explain: You are here to purchase goods for your own business. You need the goods to sell to your customers, so you must make sure you receive only the highest quality. I, on the other hand, do not sell what I buy. In fact, I don't even need it at all. You see, I am a very wealthy man, and I'm very fond of the owner of this store. I know he has a hard time eking out a living, so from time to time I come in and make a large purchase. That way, he makes a living without having to feel he has accepted charity. I don't need what I buy, so I give it away to the poor and needy. And since I have no need for what I'm buying, it really makes no difference to me exactly what he gives me. I'll take anything at all - as long as I can pay him for what I get. If he's happy, then I'm happy!"

Hashem created the world, and gave us the Torah, in which He instructs us to perform the 613 mitzvos. Hashem does not in any way need our Torah and mitzvos. He did it for our own good, so that through Torah and mitzvos we refine our characters, and receive reward both in this world and in the World to Come. We give Hashem nothing by keeping the Torah, except for the satisfaction He has from being able to reward us amply, as He desires.

Were Hashem to, G-d forbid, need our mitzvos in any way, then, as the peddler, He would have to make sure they passed the most rigorous inspection, and were free from all flaws and inconsistencies. But since He does not need them - and asks only that we perform mitzvos in order that He may reward us - like the wealthy businessman He accepts all mitzvos; big and small, pure and impure. "Give Me whatever you've got - it makes no difference." Hashem, we say, You are Konei Ha-Kol, You 'buy' any goods we've got - so please accept our teshuva, our prayers, and our charity, small and insignificant though they may be!

Wishing our readers a good Shabbos Shuva, and a G'mar Chasima Tova.

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