

# PUTTING THE SQUEEZE ON SIN

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

*"It is found in the Midrash," the holy Rebbe of Belz used to say, "that there is a mountain just outside the Land of Israel called the Mountain of Faith. When Moshiach arrives, the Jews will encounter this mountain on the verge of entering the Land. They will stop there, and sing song to Hashem, and then they will enter the Holy Land."*

Why, he asked, if they are already so close, would they not put off their song for a few more moments, in order that the song be sung in Israel, and not on the impure soil of the Diaspora?

The Torah, in commanding us to take the Four Species on Sukkos, writes (Vayikra/Leviticus 23:40), "You shall take for yourselves on the first day, the fruit of a beautiful tree (Esrog), branches of a date palm (Lulav), braided tree branches (Hadasim), and brook willows (Aravos)." The Midrash (Tanchuma Emor 22) asks:

Why does the Torah refer to the "first day?" Isn't Sukkos on the fifteenth day (of Tishrei)? It is called "first," because it is the first day for the counting of sins.

The Tur (Orach Chaim 581) explains that on Yom Kippur we were absolved of our sins. Since then, we have been so busy getting ready for Sukkos that there was no time to sin. In this sense, Sukkos is the "first day that sins are counted," for the coming year.

Aside from the obvious discomfort some of us may feel at having squeezed-in a sin or two over the past few days in seeming contravention of this principle, we might also ask why the Torah would go out of its way to mark the date from when the sin-tally commences. Is this cause for celebration? Also, why does the Midrash refer to the first day of the reckoning of sins, as opposed to the first day sins are committed?

The holy Kedushas Levi, R' Levi Yitzchak of Berditchov zt"l, explained that the Gemara (Yoma 86b) teaches that depending on the type of repentance (teshuva), different types of absolution are granted. One who does teshuva out of fear (of punishment), any intentional sins he has committed are given the status of accidental sins. There's still a blemish, it's just a lot smaller. One, however, who repents not out of fear but out of love for Hashem and extreme regret for having done something that displeased Him, not only are his sins completely forgiven - they are commuted to mitzvos!

At first glance, this concept seems difficult to understand. Forgiveness is something we can grasp;

we express regret, remorse, we accept not to sin again, and we are forgiven. It's something we practice with our children and our friends all the time. While Divine forgiveness is far more complex, the concept is a familiar one. But what is the logic, and indeed where is the justice, in taking sins and converting them into mitzvos - thereby increasing the sinner's reward due to his having sinned!

When one repents out of fear for punishment, he wishes nothing more than to bury his sins beneath the ground and pretend they never happened. Teshuva me-ahava, repentance borne by love, has nothing to do with sweeping the dirt under the carpet. It's not even like giving the dirt a really good scrubbing. Love motivates the penitent to revisit his sins - time and time again - not to agonize over them, but rather to examine them and extract an important lesson; the extent of his desires, and the lengths he's willing to go to achieve them. The insight that can be gained by analyzing our least-auspicious moments has the potential to transform the passion and desire to sin into a holy fire that burns to study Torah and do mitzvos with more zest, energy, and enthusiasm than we may ever have realized had we never sinned. This is why (Berachos 34b), "Where the penitent stand, even the most righteous can't stand."

Perhaps, then, it is not that through teshuva out of love one's sins are per se converted to mitzvos gratis. Rather the teshuva me-ahava process elevates and rectifies the sins by allowing the ba'al teshuva to grow in his service of Hashem and achieve far greater levels than he would have otherwise.

During the Days of Awe, from the beginning of Elul until after Yom Kippur, the teshuva process is generally undertaken out of fear of the approaching Days of Judgement. We repent, but since it is driven by fear, we do not yet have the opportunity to take our pitfalls and turn them into merits. When Sukkos - "zeman simchaseinu/the time of our joy" arrives, we rejoice with the Yom Tov's special mitzvos like no other time of the year. It is only then that we are fully able to strive for the higher level of teshuva, through love, through which sins become credits. This is what the Midrash means, says the Kedushas Levi, when it refers to Sukkos as "the first day that sins are counted," i.e. it is the first time that we go back and "count up" our sins that we previously swept under the rug; we examine them, take out of them what we can, and hopefully become better Jews as a result.

The Ba'al Shem Tov uses this concept to explain the verse (Jeremiah 50:20), which, speaking about Moshiach's times, says, "In those days and at that time, says Hashem, the iniquity of Israel will be sought, but it will not be there, the transgressions of Judah, but they will not be found; for I will forgive those whom I allow to remain." If Israel's sins will be forgiven, he asks, then why go looking for them? He answers: To convert them into mitzvos!

Yet this begs the question: If they're being sought in order to convert them into mitzvos, why does Scripture state that they won't be found?

"So remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come, and those years arrive of which you will say, 'I have no pleasure in them.' (Koheles/Ecclesiastes 12:1)" The Ramban

(Devarim/Deuteronomy 30:6) writes that the "days of no pleasure" refers to the period of Moshiach. They are called this, because we will no longer desire worldly pleasure, and keeping the Torah will become easy and matter-of-fact. The verse warns us that we should remember our Creator in "the days of our youth" - before Moshiach's times, for now we have the opportunity to perfect ourselves and hopefully accumulate reward in the World to Come. Once Moshiach arrives, free-will will lapse, and that opportunity will be gone forever.

Perhaps this is what the Ba'al Shem Tov meant. In those times, when we no longer have to contend with the yetzer hara (perverse inclination), we would very much like to re-examine our previous sins, grow through them, and convert them into mitzvos. But we will have missed our chance. Once the challenge is gone, there is no longer a need, nor a benefit, in teshuva, and the opportunity to earn reward ceases to exist. It is a scary thought.

This is why, says the Belzer Rav, before entering the Land, we will stop to sing song on the Mountain of Faith. We realize that once we enter Israel in the Messianic state, there will be no more opportunities for trials and challenges, no more tests of our faith, which at times made us feel so bleak and distant. From then on, we will serve Hashem with clarity and vision. There will be no need to buffer our hearts against the onslaught of unanswered questions and doubts that plagued us in the past. And we realize that in a way, we will miss it. We will miss the opportunity to believe in Hashem even when life was so difficult. And we will take one last moment to sing to Hashem - from hearts full of faith on the Mountain of Faith - before we enter the Land of Clarity.

While we anxiously await Moshiach's arrival every day, this Sukkos it's important to remember the galus-specific opportunity of teshuva with love.

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