

SHABBOS TESHUVAH

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

It's hard to believe that we are now in 5778, b"H. Time moves SO fast these days. I'm not sure, but I think Tuesday and Wednesday have been removed from the weekly schedule. I just find myself going from Monday to Thursday each week. It's Shabbos before I know it, b"H.

Every Shabbos is special, but this Shabbos is especially special. Next week Shabbos will also be Yom Kippur, so in sense, it is cancelled out. Except for the insertions for Shabbos in dovening, we won't do much to remind us that it is Shabbos. Yom Kippur will supersede everything.

This Shabbos is about teshuvah. The truth is, EVERY Shabbos is about teshuvah. The word Shabbos—Shin-Bais-Tav—stands for "Shabbos bo teshuvah," or "teshuvah on Shabbos." It is the day that the world reboots, so-to-speak, and we should as well. The six working days are the journey, and Shabbos is the day we sit down and consider if we're still on track or not, and how to get back on track if we strayed.

The person who checks his map often strays little. He is quicker to find his mistakes and the solutions for them. The longer a person waits to confirm his route in life, the further he can stray and complicate his return. Many who do not keep Shabbos can go a whole lifetime and barely ever check their personal map. That's one of the great benefits of having Shabbos in life. It MAKES you check your course.

The Pri Tzaddik explains (Parashas Massey) that Shabbos plays a similar role to the 42 camps at which the Jewish people stopped throughout their 40 years in the desert. Each stop corresponded to a letter from God's 42-letter Name used by prophets to go into a state of prophecy. When a person "acquires" all 42 letters, they have completed their purpose in life, and are ready to go to the World-to-Come.

The journeys, the Pri Tzaddik explains, were far from random. Each section of the journey was designated to acquire the next letter of the 42-letter Name. The camp that followed was meant to help the Jewish people integrate the lessons and level, achieved from the previous journey. If they were successful, then they would have been ready to acquire the next possible letter through the next leg of their journey.

People go to work each week because they have to. It is how they put food on the table and their children through school. Some people have interesting jobs and learn from them. Most do what they must to get their work done, keep their job, and get paid each week. They don't see their work week

as another opportunity to acquire another letter from God's holy 42-letter Name.

Shabbos is their break from the work week. It is a day they are even commanded to forget about their previous week's work, and not think about the work week coming up. It is a mini-vacation from the hustle and bustle of the secular world. It is rarely thought as a way to integrate the spiritual lessons from the previous six days of work.

This is the way it goes for most people, whether they work or stay at home to raise a family. The week run into Shabbos, and Shabbos runs into the week, week-after-week, month-and-month, year-after-year. Forty-two letters of God's Name? What's that? What does it have to do with making sure the cholent doesn't burn on Shabbos?

Even people who remain in holier environments, such as those who learn in yeshivah all week long, don't necessarily "get it." If people spend more than 10 percent on character development during their week, that is already a lot. Most of the time is spent learning halachah and Gemora, which tends to deal mostly with the technical laws, such as the laws of damages or kashrus. Even the parshah does not get the time it deserves.

The problem is two-fold. Most people do not even know about such ideas. It's like the person who couldn't read a machzor and didn't know the prayers by heart. On Yom Kippur, he just repeated the Aleph-Bais all day long and told God to arrange them into the proper words and prayers. We do what we do to survive, and having no idea how it helps with our personal tikun, we expect God to work it all out for us.

There is a basis for this. We DO have 613 mitzvos to perform, and even though we may not know how they help us or Creation, if we have the proper intention and execute the mitzvos properly, they'll do their intended job. How much we don't know, and can't usually tell since we don't see much difference in our lives before and after. A profounder understanding of the mitzvos certainly can help with that, but who has time for that?

That's the second problem. Time. Most people just find themselves racing against the clock just to complete their most basic responsibilities. How many people have time to even consider using mitzvos to do something mystical like acquire a letter from the Name of God? It sounds like something you do for extra credit, not as a way of Torah life!

"It's the HEART that God wants." On one hand, it is the most obvious thing in the world. OF COURSE God wants us to be SINCERE when learning Torah and performing mitzvos! What value would they have if we faked the whole thing?

The truth is, as obvious a point this is in THEORY, it is very NOT obvious in practice, and THAT'S what life proves. If life is anything at all, it is distracting. It's bad enough that we don't have enough time to do the things we ought to do. We're also so distracted that we can't really focus properly on the things we CAN do!

You can thank Amalek for that. I don't mean Amalek the people, because they died off ages ago. I mean Amalek the spiritual reality that the people once embodied. Today it has many types of "bodies," but they all end up doing the same thing. They distract us away from doing the right thing, or at least thinking about what we're doing while we're doing it.

A mitzvah without kavanah—intention—is like a body without a soul. It exists, but it is very limited in terms of what it can do. Amalek, in whatever form of distraction "he" takes, does whatever he can to take a person's mind off what he is doing, ESPECIALLY if it is in the direct service of God.

Call him what you want: Amalek, Sitra Achra, the yetzer hara. It doesn't really matter who or what he is. What counts is the net result: making blessings without thinking about what they REALLY mean, doing mindless mitzvos, and thanking God for good without REALLY appreciating what He has given to us.

It is the most frustrating thing in the world. I am ready to make a brochah after using the bathroom. I am grateful for my health because I don't always have it. It is so easy to get sick, and sicker, God forbid. Billions of things can go wrong with a person's body, and God has His finger on ALL of them. "Asher yatzar" is certainly ONE brochah you don't want to mess with.

Next thing I know, the brochah is over and I missed it. I said it, but somehow, and at some point, my mind, and therefore my heart moved on. I made a soul-less blessing. The same is true with bentching, and so many other blessings that we should be saying with the deepest and most profound intention, but don't.

It is similar with mitzvos in general. They are relatively easy to do by habit. It is so easy to learn Torah without appreciating what it is, and what it does for us. It is easy to be religious without including God in the picture, which suits Amalek, or whatever you want to call that anti-religious force in Creation, just fine. He doesn't mind if people do religious things. He can't tolerate it when they connect a person to God.

This is the REAL teshuvah to do at this time of the year. It is to re-infuse God back into our religious lives. It is something that so many people assume is automatic with the learning of Torah and the performance of mitzvos. Life teaches otherwise. Amalek doesn't go away when a person becomes religious. He just changes and intensifies his strategy and attack.

This is ultimately what it means to make God King at this time of year. A king is nothing without the loyalty of his subjects. Loyalty is about more than the simple act of obedience. It is about the heart behind the act. God wants it. We have to give it.