

SAY IT WITH CHUMROS

by Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

The forty days from the beginning of Elul through Yom Kippur correspond with the forty days during which Moshe beseeched Hashem to forgive Bnei Yisroel for the sin of the Golden Calf. Since Moshe was answered favorably, descending from Mount Sinai on Yom Kippur with the new set of Tablets, this time period is known as the "Y'mei Ratzon", a time when it is possible to rekindle our relationship with the Almighty.¹

Consequently, Chazal record that during this time a person should accept upon himself greater "chumros" - "stringencies" in his observance. Most perplexing however, is the fact that we do not find any requirement to continue with these observances after the Yomim Nora'im. Performing these stringent acts during this time period only, appears hypocritical. What message are we relaying to the Almighty?

Our Rabbis tell us that the word "Elul" is an acronym for the phrase "Ani l'dodi v'dodi li" - "I am for my beloved and my beloved is for me". These days are designated for focusing upon our relationship with Hashem. If a man were to bring his wife flowers daily, doing the same on their anniversary would not express his love for her. At times which are designated for expressing our true feelings for our loved ones, a form of expression different than that used year-round is required. Similarly, when expressing to Hashem our love and commitment to Him, we must go beyond our regular observance in order to effectively convey our true feelings. Therefore, additional commitments are required only at this time of the year.

1.Kitsur Shulchan Aruch #128:1

The Healer Is On-Call

After the sin of Bas Sheva, Nossan the prophet approached David, rebuking him for his transgression. David responded "chatsi laHashem" - "I have sinned to Hashem".⁶ Shaul too, when rebuked by the prophet Shmuel, replied "chatsi ki avarti es pi Hashem" - "I have sinned, violating Hashem's word".⁷ Although there appears to be no difference between the contrition of Shaul and that of David, the answer lies in Shaul's subsequent words, "ki yareisi es ha'am va'eshma b'kolam" - "for I was fearful of the nation, bowing to their demands".⁸ Whereas David simply stated "I have

sinned", Shaul attempted to offer a reason for why he acted in the way that he did, claiming that it was due to the pressure of the people. By attempting to offer an excuse, Shaul was abrogating his responsibility for the transgression. The most important element of Teshuva is accepting complete responsibility for our actions and not attempting to shift the blame. David was therefore offered a reprieve, having repented completely, while Shaul was not, for his penitence was lacking.

Focusing upon past experiences and connecting them to present behaviors often leads to the abrogation of responsibility. The Torah wants us to focus only upon our actions when doing Teshuva, since we are expected to take complete responsibility for the transgressions we have perpetrated. Any attempt during the Teshuva process to identify the behavior as a manifestation of a past experience is, in actuality, an attempt to mitigate blame for our actions. Therefore, the Rambam includes the principle of free choice in the Laws of Teshuva, for it is the ability to choose right from wrong that holds us completely accountable for our choices. Having proclivities or propensities from past experiences does not affect our ability to choose the right course of action. Past experiences or personality traits only make it a greater challenge to do the right thing; a person does not have the right to say that he acts the way he does because that is who he is. Unless a person meets the Halachic criteria that renders him legally incompetent to make decisions, he must hold himself completely accountable for all his decisions.

Psychological analysis can be beneficial when used to determine a person's challenges and the way in which he should address them. But, when used to deflect responsibility, it is harmful, for the behavior becomes entrenched within the person and creates excuses for his actions.

The Talmud teaches that there are two forms of "refu'ah" - "healing", the healing of sickness and the healing that follows Teshuva, as is stated in the verse "veshav verafa lo" - "and he will repent and he will be healed".⁹ It is generally understood that this form of healing addresses the healing for the damage to our souls which is caused by the sins that we perform. However, this healing can also be understood as the healing that Hashem affords us after Teshuva, to remove those underlying forces which created our propensity to act in a sinful manner.

During the ten days of repentance, Hashem, who is our Healer, is closer to us and waiting for us to call upon Him. Therefore, during this time it is easier to remove the underlying causes of our malevolent behavior. Hashem will remove these causes, as long as we take complete responsibility for our actions.

6.Shmuel II 12:13 7.Shmuel I 6:24 8.ibid 9.Megilla 17b