

Teshuva as Returning to Ourselves

What are we trying to do today?

For many years I assumed that the objective of Yom Ha-Din - the Day of Judgment, or of תשובה, is a process of religious repentance. Doesn't that sound right? הרב עדין שטיינזליץ says simply and sincerely that despite the month we spend every year studying about teshuva, we are still left with only a vague sense of what is actually required of us in order to repent – of what real teshuva is.

According to the Rambam/Maimonides, teshuva deals with repenting for one's sins. He writes that we must go through the stages of acknowledging the sin, regretting it, and deciding to take a better path. But is this even practical or feasible? And if so, why do we find ourselves in the exact same spot year after year when we reach this point in time? Our sins repeat themselves, and we too must repeat the same process required of us last year, and the year before.

Is there another definition of teshuvah that feels more real or possible for us? An ancient Midrash from מסכת פסחים teaches us that teshuva is one of the things created even before the creation of the world:

בבלי פסחים נד, ע"א:
והא תניא: שבעה דברים נבראו קודם שנברא העולם, ואלו הן: תורה, ותשובה, וגן עדן, וגיהנם,
וכסא הכבוד, ובית המקדש, ושמו של משיח...
Seven things were created before the world was created, and they are: The Torah, Repentance (teshuva) etc.

If teshuva existed prior to the world – then it also existed before sin. If so, teshuva as a response to sin is only one aspect within a larger concept of teshuva. According to the Midrash, teshuva is something essential to the world – it is not merely a passing episode of amending sin but rather, the foundation of the world, the foundation of our lives.

And if this is so, what exactly is that teshuva?

In his book “אורות התשובה”, HaRav Kook talks of **return to one's self** and writes:

When we forget the essence of our own soul... everything becomes confused and in doubt. The primary teshuva, that which immediately lights the darkness, is when a person returns to himself, to the root of his soul – then he will immediately return to God, to the soul of all souls.

According to Rav Kook, teshuva is returning to the root of our selves, and thus to God.

But how can we do this?

Our inner self is deep and broad, and beyond it lies the very self of God. The return to godliness is like the return to the foundation, to home base. This return means, says הרב שטיינזולץ, independence - self recognition. The return to one's self is the essence of godliness. This is not just a religious return of mitzvot or good deeds, prayer or inspection of actions - but rather, a return to the place I belong. In other words, a person's return, or teshuva, is simply to be himself or herself as much as possible. And this is the proper teshuva; this is the place of closeness that God seeks. We must be ourselves more, must be in our own proper place despite everything that is happening around us. To hear our own voice, to be more connected to ourselves.

The key to teshuva is being in the right place in the world for us as special people, distinct from everyone else, as a person with a sense of special self-destiny. A person should say: "The world was created for me" and to attempt to identify that special mission for which she or he was born.

This is the meaning of the well-known saying of Rav Meshulam Zusha of אגניפולי, brother of the famous Rav Elimelech of Lizhensk: "If they ask me in Heaven why I wasn't Elimelech, I will know how to answer. But if they ask me why I wasn't Zusha – I will have no words". This is the essence of Teshuva – to be like Zusha again, the call from ourselves to be us and to fulfill our mission in the world.

HaRav Kook explains further that sin results from forgetting the "me", whether as individuals or as a collective. The question "איכה" – where are you - is the question that lies at the core of sin. He writes:

The sin of Adam, [the first man,] which according to the Gemara took place on Rosh Hashanah, was that he became estranged from himself, that he yielded to the snake's opinion, and lost himself. He failed to answer a clear

response to the question of איכה because he didn't recognize his own soul, because the real sense of self was lost from him... (איכה ד, כ) "רוח אפינו משיח ד'"
"The breath of our nostrils, the anointed of God"

... does not come from an external source, it is the breath of our nostrils - in other words, it comes from within. We seek ourselves - we seek and we will find. (Orot HaKodesh 3, 97)

This, then, I believe, is the basic definition of teshuvah. Returning to ourselves and the Divine Spark in each of us. Discovering, or rediscovering, who we are and what our mission is in this world.

This is what we are striving to do today.

Do we really know how to be ourselves?

Among the all the voices we hear each day, which is ours?

The answer begins with the feeling of the returner – this is my place, here is where I have internal happiness, here is where I belong.

Each one of us knows the special feeling of the happiness of meeting ourselves. If it's something you learn, you work, you hear, a place that return you to yourself. It is a special moment when you feel God's presence.

Growing up I wanted to learn G'mara.

As you know, I'm from Israel and gemara studies in school were almost only for boys. When I was in the university - it was the time of the beginning of the growth of women's torah studies in Israel on a widespread and public scale, and women's batei midrash and gemara study programs were opening. Alongside my university studies I also studied at MATAN. I remember that I would come home and tell my mom about how what I had learned that day shook the depths of my soul. This was an exciting and real feeling of joy and satisfaction, a feeling that signaled – this is where you belong. A feeling that indicates and shows – this is the path to your-self. This is an experience I carry that reminds me the feeling of hearing my voice, going back to myself.

Each one of us has similar experiences, when they know - this is me.

There is no large or small role in the world. Every person is destined to give something to the world, to leave his or her special impression, to fulfill the role that is hers or his alone. A feeling such as this is the light by which we must tread.

("הושע י"ד ב") "שובה ישראל עד ה' אלוהיך" "Return Israel, to the LORD your God" (Hosea 14, 2). The return to my self is the return to God.

Feeling uncomfortable or displeased, questioning or hesitating – these are a distancing from the internal self, from the divine seed planted in me. And maybe we can call this distancing, sin. Real teshuva is that passion to connect again and again to that same feeling of self discovery the divine spark in me, within myself; the repeated attempt to preserve the place to which I belong.

We sometimes imagine what it would be like if we could start over again without the mistakes that we have made along the way, to start over but this time with the experience we have today. This is Rosh HaShanna – a day of beginning, a day on which it is as if everything is erased and we are given an opportunity to start anew, a day of another chance to restart the lives we were supposed to live, to live the lives we imagine.

Our return to ourselves creates the closeness to God – our return to ourselves reveals and connects us to our internal image of God, to our divine spark.

No one captures this sentiment better than one of our bayit's theme songs, a song that Rav Avi has sung with us for years. Schlomo Carlebach's famous niggun-Return.

I can't pull off singing from the bimah like Rav Avi can! But the words resonate with me particularly today, as I am trying to get back to my own self, in his words:

Return Again

Music and Lyrics : Schlomo Carlebach

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Return again, return again

Return to the land of your Soul

Return again, return again

Return to the land of your Soul

return to who you are, Return to what you are

Return to where you are

Born and reborn again

Return again, return again,

Return to the land of your Soul

Return again, return again

Return to the land of your Soul...

