

## Kedushat Levi on Teshuvah

R. Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev (c. 1740-1810), early Hasidic master

או יבואר, "השיבנו ה' אליך ונשובה חדש ימינו כקדם" (איכה ה, כא). ויש דקדוק מאי כקדם? ויבואר על פי המדרש "ועתה ישראל מה ה' אליך שואל מעמך כי אם ליראה" (דברים י, יב) ואיתא במדרש (ב"ר כא) "אין ועתה אלא תשובה". ופירוש כך הוא: משום דכל אדם ואדם מישראל מחויב להאמין באמונה שלימה שבכל רגע ורגע מקבל חיות מהבורא ברוך הוא, כמו שדרשו (ב"ר יד ט) "כל הנשמה תהלל": כל נשימה ונשימה תהלל י"ה" (תהלים קנ"ו). שבכל רגע החיות רוצה לצאת מן האדם, והקדוש ברוך הוא שולח לו בכל רגע חיות חדש. נמצא לפי זה, מהני תשובה לכל אדם. כי בעת שעושה תשובה, מאמין שהוא כעת בריה חדשה, ובזה השם יתברך ברוב רחמיו אינו מזכיר לו עונות הראשונים. אבל אם חס ושלום אינו מאמין בזה חס ושלום לא מהני התשובה.

וזה פירוש המדרש "אין ועתה אלא תשובה": כיון שהוא מאמין שהוא עתה בריה חדשה מהני לו תשובה. וזהו פירוש הפסוק "השיבנו ה' אליך ונשובה", ואיך נשובה? "חדש ימינו כקדם". ובו יבואר הגמרא (סנהדרין צה.) אימתי אתי מר אמר לו היום כו', היום אם בקולו תשמעו: כשתהיו על בחינה הזאת שבכל יום נעשה בריה חדשה:

*Turn us back, YHVH, to You, and we shall return; make our days new k'kedem* (Lamentations 5:21). What is the meaning of the word "k'kedem"? We can clarify this according to the midrash on the verse, *And now [v'atah] Israel, what does YHVH your God ask of you? Only this, to be in awe of YHVH your God, to walk in all God's paths, and to love God, and to serve YHVH your God with all your heart and all your soul.* (Deuteronomy 10:12). The midrash teaches, "**v'atah**—this can only mean *teshuvah*." [See Midrash #1]

This is what it means: every person must believe with full trust that in each and every moment she receives life-force [*chiyut*] from the Creator, as the midrash teaches: "For every breath (*nishima*) that a person breathes, she needs to praise the Creator. Why? '*Kol haneshama tehallel Yah*' (Psalms 150:6)—meaning, 'Every breath will praise Yah.'" For in every moment the life-force seeks to leave a person, and the Blessed Holy One sends in each moment new *chiyut*. [See Midrash #2]

From this we can understand that every person has the capacity to experience *teshuvah*. In the moment that a person transforms themselves through *teshuvah*, they also come to believe that they have become a new creation. On that basis, the Blessed Holy One, with great compassion, does not recall earlier transgressions. But if (God forbid!) a person does not believe this, then their *teshuvah* is ineffective. This then explains the teaching in the earlier midrash: "**v'atah**—this can only mean *teshuvah*." When we believe that we are made new each moment, our *teshuvah* will be effective. And this explains the verse from Lamentations: *Turn us back, YHVH, to You, and we shall return*—how shall we return?--*make our days new k'kedem*. In the same manner we can understand the lesson in the Talmud: [When Rabbi Joshua ben Levi met the Messiah, he asked him] "When will you come?" He responded, "Today"...He meant, "Today, if you will listen to God's voice." What the teaching means is that the Messiah will come when we have attained this quality, that with every day we become a new being. [Midrash #3]

**The root kedem כִּדְמָ :** This word means has a geographic meaning - “east” or “front”—and also a temporal meaning - “before” or “antiquity.” Thus it means both “very old” and “beginning.” The verse from Lamentations – *chadesh yameinu k’kedem* – is often translated “renew our days as of old.” How would you translate it?

### **Midrash #1: Genesis Rabbah 21:6**

*And Adonai God said, “Here, the human has become like one of us, knowing good and evil, and now [v’atah], what if he should stretch out his hand and take fruit also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever? (Genesis 3:22):* Rabbi Abba Bar Kahana said: This teaches that the Blessed Holy One gave him an opportunity to do *teshuvah*—“**v’atah**”—this can only mean *teshuvah*, as it says, *And now [v’atah] Israel, what does YHVH your God ask of you? (Deuteronomy 10:12)*

### **Midrash #2: Genesis Rabbah 14:9**

*YHVH formed the human being from dust of the earth, and blew into his mouth nishmat chayim/the breath of life, and the human became a living being. (Gen. 2:7):* ...Rabbi Bisni, Rabbi Acha, and Rabbi Yohanan in Rabbi Meir’s name taught: The *neshamah* fills the body, and when a person is sleeping, it ascends and draws life down for her from above. Rabbi Levi in the name of Rabbi Chanina taught: For every breath (*nishima*) that a person breathes, she needs to praise the Creator. Why? “*Kol haneshama tehallel Yah*” (Psalms 150:6)—meaning, “Every breath will praise Yah.”

### **Midrash #3: Talmud, Sanhedrin 98a**

R. Joshua b. Levi met Elijah standing by the entrance of R. Shimon bar Yochai's tomb. He asked him: ‘When will the Messiah come?’ — ‘Go and ask him himself,’ was his reply. ‘Where is he sitting?’ — ‘At the entrance [of the town].’ And by what sign may I recognize him?’ — ‘He is sitting among the poor lepers: all of them untie their bandages all at once, and re-bandage them together, whereas he unties and re-bandages each separately, [before treating the next], thinking, should I be wanted, [it being time for my appearance as the Messiah] I must not be delayed [through having to bandage a number of sores].’ So Rabbi Joshua went to him and greeted him, saying, ‘peace upon you, Master and Teacher.’ ‘Peace upon you, O son of Levi,’ he replied. ‘When will you come, Master?’ ‘Today,’ was his answer. When Rabbi Joshua returned to Elijah, the latter enquired, ‘What did he say to you?’ — ‘He spoke falsely to me,’ he answered, ‘stating that he would come today, but he has not.’ Elijah answered him, ‘This is what he said to you: ‘*Today, if you will hear his voice*’ (Psalms 95:7)

- **What do you make of Levi Yitzchak’s insistence that we must believe we can be totally made anew?**
- **How does being made new connect with the idea of *teshuvah*, return? What is the “*kedem*” we are returning to? What does the Messiah have to do with it??**

השיבנו ה' אליך ונשובה חדש ימינו כקדם

*Hashivenu hashivenu Adonai elekha v’nashuvah, v’nashuvah – chadesh (3x) k’kedem*