



# The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the  
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Devarim

Parshat Vayeilech / Shabbat Shuvah

Tishrei 5782 / September 2021



זכרונו לברכ

Today is the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9/11

MAY THE MEMORY OF ALL THOSE LOST IN THE  
TRAGEDY OF THE DAY BE FOR A BLESSING

## Unraveling a Riddle

By Anonymous

שובה ישראל אל עד יהוה אלהיך כי כשלת בעונך:  
הושע 14:2

Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God,  
For you have fallen because of your sin.

Our *Haftorah* implores us to return from our misdeeds, *דרכי יהוה יצדקים ילכו כם ופושעים יכשלו בהם*: *For the paths of the LORD are smooth; the righteous can walk on them, while sinners stumble on them.* (14:10)

It's probably no cosmic accident that this Shabbat of Return coincides each year with the start of the school year. For most of us our body's master clock — the suprachiasmatic nucleus which resides in our brains — is indelibly set to recognize this as a time of return. September is the time we start anew with a shiny new notebook filled with blank pages.

*Shabbat Shuvah* is the opportunity to take a breath between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. It's the time to contemplate the forgiveness we prayed for and anticipate how we will fill the pages before us.

Our *Haftorah* instructs:

קחו עמכם דברים ושובו אליהו אלו פלתישא עון וקח טוב ונשלמה פרים שפתינו:

Take words with you. And return to the LORD. Say to Him: Forgive all guilt and accept what is good; Instead of bulls, we will pay [the offering of] our lips. (14:3)

The Gemara explains:

אבל הקדוש ברוך הוא, אדם עובר עבירה בסתר — מתפייס ממנו בדברים, שנאמר: "קחו עמכם דברים ושובו אל ה'".

*But with regard to the Holy One, Blessed be He, if a person commits a transgression in private, God is appeased by words, as it is stated [14:3 הושע]: "Take with you words and return to God."* (*Yoma* 86b)

What words do we take? Our *siddur* provides a template.

How should they be said? Our *siddur* offers instructions. But this template and these instructions are often opaque, and the words sometimes appear as riddles. Here's an example that when deciphered resonates with me, *וטהר לבנו לעבדך באמת*. *Purify our hearts so that we may serve you with the truth.*

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We recite these words on the *Yamim Noraim* and Shabbat, and on Yom Tov. Is it a logical statement or a riddle? Isn't it redundant? If we pray with a pure heart, aren't our prayers truthful by definition? What does *בְּאֵמֶת*, *truthfully* or *sincerely*, add that the words *וְטָהַר לְבַנּוֹ*, *pure heart*, don't already embrace?

Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein does a masterful job of unraveling this riddle\* which he notes is “the conspectus of several themes.” He teaches the value-added of *בְּאֵמֶת* by considering its opposite, *טְעוּת*, *error*, and *שְׂקָר*, *deception*. “The former,” he notes, “is concerned with correlation to fact, the latter with distortion.”

Errors can enter our prayers even when our heart is pure through, for example, misinterpretation or misapplication of *halacha*. That is why the Rambam instructs us to pray that we don't stumble when studying *halacha* every time we enter a study hall. “Contiguous to the area of *halacha*, and yet distinct from it, is the second arena of potential error, that of *emuna*, faith.” A factor that Rabbi Lichtenstein describes as, “the fundamental element out of whose premises others derive and upon which the entire system rests.”

*שְׂקָר*, *falsehood* or *deception*, can “adulterate” our prayers in many ways. Rabbi Lichtenstein considers falsehood in spirituality; “a world of desiccated spirit and insouciant observance.” We say the words but lack sincerity. And beyond “the falsehood of sham,” he writes, “there is that of cant, religious existence that is not the real thing because it is shallow and shoddy,” false spirituality.

*Tefillah* without *טְעוּת* or *שְׂקָר* is a high standard. This morsel of prayer — *וְטָהַר לְבַנּוֹ לְעִבְדֶּךָ בְּאֵמֶת* — is a mouthful that, as Rabbi Lichtenstein noted, contains all the elements of what is essential in prayer and important in life.

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Rabbi Lichtenstein makes no pretense that it is an easy standard to achieve. He quotes Rav Amital, who told a story of the *Ba'al Shem Tov's* students asking how they could determine if a *tzaddik* who had recently come to the area was genuine or an imposter. “Inquire of him,” the *Ba'al Shem Tov* suggested, “whether he has a foolproof prescription against aberrant thoughts during *tefillah*. If he does, you can rest assured he's a fraud.”

It is precisely because the bar is so high that *Shabbat Shuvah* is an opportune time to take a breath, contemplate the forgiveness we prayed for, and anticipate what to put on the blank pages that are before us.

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\* Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, “Purify Our Hearts to Serve You With Truth,” 1992 Teshuva Lecture in *Return and Renewal: Reflections on Teshuva and Spiritual Growth*, Koren Press, 2018

Want to write or dedicate a Parsha essay?  
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