

TESHUVAH: A Joyous Homecoming

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God loves you. Every morning when we put on tefillin and wrap the fingers of the left hand, we repeat the word of God spoken through the prophet Hosea, “And I will betroth you to Me forever. I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, in loyalty and in love. And I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness, and you shall know the Lord.”

Who is this *You* that we are addressing? When we speak to God with the words of Hosea, we are stepping into an intimate dimension, to face the one Power we call God, not as an *It* but as *You, Ata*. We are being challenged to open ourselves to experience intimacy: to enter into a personal relationship with God. We call out to God as *You* because *you* is personal. We call out to God as *You* because this is the language of relationship. It is with the living *yous* in our lives that we practice relationship and learn all we know of intimacy. We long to know and be known, to love and be loved. While the Divine reveals itself to us when we stand in awe before the mystery of the universe, we just as often discover God in profound intimate moments that we share with another—with a beloved, with children, with friends, or in coming to know our own innermost selves.

Entering into relationship with God means finding God in our lives, opening ourselves to the presence of divinity all around us. The much admired modern Jewish teacher Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (of blessed memory) taught that it is not because God has no face that Jews make no portraits of God. Rather, he said,

The reason is that all faces are God’s face. To select one and elevate it above the others would be incomplete, deficient, *pasul* (unacceptable). Every time I say *you* to my beloved, I speak to God. Every time I say *You* to God, I affirm the presence of that *You* in every other *you*. I must see God in each face, in each *you*, or I risk treating you as a use-object, an *it*.

The great Jewish poet Yehudah Halevi expressed this reciprocal relationship in a beautiful poem—

God (Yah), where shall I find you?
High and hidden is your Place;

And where shall I not find you?
Your presence fills Time and Space.
I have sought your nearness,
With all my heart I called to You!
And going out to meet You,
I found You coming toward me.

The liturgy expresses this reciprocal love in the Ahavah Rabbah and Shema prayers. First we recite Ahavah Rabah, beginning

With great love, you have loved us, O Lord our God.

Immediately following in the first passage in the Shema, we recite

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.

God's love is unconditional. The Rabbis understand another verse in Hosea, "I will love them freely," to mean that God will love us even when we are unworthy, i.e., without the certainty of reciprocal love. Even when humanity fails in its obligations of conduct and decency, it does not forfeit Divine concern. However, there are degrees and differences. God loves all humanity, but can draw closer to those who love God.

On Rosh Hashanah we reaffirm God's kingship. With this acknowledgement, on Yom Kippur, we are eager to express our readiness for a loving relationship with the Divine Presence, and we move to seek forgiveness for our sins. On Yom Kippur a good portion of every Amidah prayer is taken up with confession and remorse, the two essential elements of repentance according to the Rabbis. Our words come from the deepest part of our soul. By humbling ourselves through confession, we awaken mercy and compassion from God.

How, then, do sin and teshuvah affect our relationship with God?

When we transgress and commit a sin, we create an obstruction between God and ourselves. What is really at stake is the special relationship with God. Severing of this relationship with God causes tremendous suffering.

Through teshuvah (repentance), the obstruction is removed, and we return to a close relationship with God. In contrast to the usual mournful associations with confession, the soul experiences a joyful homecoming.

Yom Kippur, then, is not at all to be understood as a mournful day; it is a day when God shows God's mercy. We leave behind our failures and transgressions, and we look forward to a year of renewed closeness to the Divine.

Yom Kippur enables us to take delight in holiness and draw our sustenance from it. On the deepest level, we gain the potential to live solely from the delight of being with God.

When does our being with God begin?

In the first moment of life an infant takes a deep breath and receives his or her Neshamah (soul) from God. The child begins to cry. This is not a cry of pain but of great joy. At that moment the child says,

Modeh/Modah ani l'fanecha, ruach chai v'kayam....

I am thankful to you, living and eternal spirit....

Elohai neshama shenatata bi tehorah hi.

My God, the soul that You have given is pure.

Hearing her child, the mother begins to cry. These are not tears of pain. But they are also tears of joy. In a fleeting moment she recalls the private times with her child during its development within her body. Remembering the private moments during pregnancy—when she knew the God-given miracle of life was in her body—thoughts of the pain and personal travail of childbirth dissolve. Her tears of joy resonate with her newborn child's tears, and she joins with her child's prayer:

Elohai neshama shenatata bi tehorah hi.

My God, the soul that You have given me is pure.

On Yom Kipper, we return to the joy of the first moment of life when God breathed our neshama (soul) into our bodies.

We are directed to recapture this joy by being more connected to other people through acts of loving kindness;

By honoring our parents
By performing acts of kindness
By attending the house of study
By providing hospitality to guests
By visiting the sick
By rejoicing with a bride and groom
By escorting the dead to the grave
By being absorbed in prayer
By bringing peace between people
By studying Torah

When we are mindful of these acts of great goodness and perform them we establish ourselves in God's world, a spiritual world. This is how the Divine Presence, the Shekhinah, manifests itself. To the extent that every person manifests his or her soul through specific actions, the Shekhinah radiates more and more strongly. Every time human beings are kind to one another, each trying to live in the light of God's teaching, each extending love, appreciation and encouragement toward the other, each manifesting his or her unique qualities, the Divine Presence shines.

It is my hope that this idea will lead each of you to say:

- I welcome teshuvah as a joyous homecoming.
- I know that I cannot touch holiness without transforming myself through teshuvah.
- I want my “deeds of loving kindness” to become an expression of my worthiness.
- Knowing that I am intimately connected to God, I will be grateful, fulfilled, and compassionate.