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On the Festivals
by
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Sukkot

Teshuvah in the Time of Rejoicing

The Ten Days of Repentance

As is known, the ten days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are the most efficacious time of the year for doing *teshuvah*. During these days, G-d is close to each and every Jew, and offers special assistance to those seeking to repent, as the Rambam writes in *Mishnah Torah (Hilkhos Teshuvah 2:6)*: “Even though repentance and crying out are always helpful, during the Ten Days of Repentance... they are *especially* helpful, and are immediately accepted, as it says: ‘Seek Hashem when He can be found’ (*Yeshayahu 55:6*).

Yet, these days are also a period of judgment, and have profound consequences for our lives the rest of the year. It is a time when we accept upon ourselves Hashem’s kingship, and we must carefully examine our deeds. A heavy “atmosphere” hangs over this period, until *neilah* of Yom Kippur, when the judgment is sealed. Afterward, our prayers return to normal: we recite “the Holy G-d” instead of “the Holy King,” and “the King who loves righteousness and justice,” rather than “the King of Justice.”

Finally, we come to Sukkot, the most joyous time of the year. The days of *teshuvah* and judgment have passed, it would seem, and we celebrate the fact that



our prayers have been accepted, and that Hashem has decreed upon us a new year of closeness to Him and His Torah.

The Decree Goes Forth

The *Zohar* (*Zohar*, vol. I p. 220a) and the writings of the Arizal (*Shaar Ha'Kavanot, Sukkot derash* 6), however, explain things differently. They tell us that even though the decree has been sealed on Yom Kippur, the sinner is not handed actually over to the messengers of retribution, who carry out the sentence, until the night of Hoshana Rabbah. Then the “decree leaves the palace of the King” and is given over to the bailiffs. Yet even then, permission to execute judgment is not granted until the day of Simhat Torah, during the *Kedusha* prayer of *Musaf*. Only then, is the judgment finally sealed. For this reason, many people have the custom to recite Tehilim and *selihot* after midnight on Hoshana Rabbah, for even then, it is still possible to rescind the decree.

This raises several questions. If the judgment continues until Simhat Torah, why do we stop reciting the special prayers and *selihot* on Yom Kippur? Furthermore, what addition type of *teshuvah* can we do during Sukkot, seeing that from the beginning of Elul until Yom Kippur, we have been involved in self-examination, regret over our misdeeds, and commitment to change, which are the main elements of *teshuvah*? Finally, why does the judgment continue until Sukkot, which is a time of joy, and brings with it a very different atmosphere than the days of repentance that preceded it?

“Return us in Complete Repentance”

In the fifth blessing of the Amidah, we ask Hashem to bring us back to Him in *teshuvah*: “Return us in complete *teshuvah* before You.” Yet, the blessing begins: “Return us, our Father, to Your *Torah*.” Clearly, then, a knowledge of Torah is a prerequisite for doing *teshuvah*; for only by studying Torah can we come to a clear recognition of our spiritual level, our obligations and responsibilities to Hashem, and what we need to rectify in our lives and how.

This is apparent in the famous Mishnah of R. Pinchas ben Yair (*Avodah Zara* 20b), which the Ramhal used as a basis for his book, *Mesilat Yesharim*: “Torah brings one to vigilance, vigilance brings one to alacrity, alacrity brings one to [spiritual] cleanliness, cleanliness brings one to abstinence... to purity, to piety, to humility...



to holiness.” In other words, the highest levels a human being can reach are all based on the very first step, which is Torah study.

Thus we understand that the first stage of *teshuvah* must be “return us, our Father, to Your Torah.” For only through Torah study can we perfect our actions, as the blessing itself continues: “and bring us close, our King, to Your service” – that is, the service of G-d through the keeping of mitzvot. Nevertheless, the blessing concludes: “and return us in complete *teshuvah* before You.” What exactly is this “complete *teshuvah*,” which goes beyond Torah study and the performance of mitzvot? What is it adding, which we did not request in the first part of the blessing?

Four Paths of Repentance

There are a number of ways to understand what this “complete *teshuvah*” means. On the one hand, it may mean the perfection of our *midot* – our behavior and personality traits, the way we talk and act, our virtues and moral fiber. Rabbi Hayyim Vital explains in *Shaarei Kedusha* (part 1 *shaar* 1-2) that the *midot* function as an intermediary between our souls and our bodies. They serve to “prepare” the body to receive the light of the soul. Thus, even though a person with unrefined *midot* can still keep the Torah, it will never come easy to him. There will always be a lack of harmony between his soul, which its 613 aspects corresponding to the 613 mitzvot, and his body, with its 613 physical limbs. In this case, the refinement of our *midot* would not be included in the first part of the blessing, for it precedes and lays the groundwork for everything else. “Return us, our Father, to Your Torah, and bring us close, our King, to Your service” – referring to the 613 mitzvot, yet without “and return us in complete *teshuvah*” – referring to the perfection of our *midot* – our Torah study and *avodah* would ultimately fail. This is as the Vilna Gaon said (*Even Shleimah* 1:2): “The main purpose of being alive is to constantly work to correct bad *midot*; for if not, why is a person alive?”

Another type of “complete *teshuvah*” relates to the essence of our souls. Every human being is born with a special purpose – the very reason for his soul’s descent into this world. Each person is blessed with unique strengths and abilities, which can help him attain his goal. Nothing in the personality is accidental. When a person actualizes his potential and realizes his purpose, he achieves individual perfection and attaches himself to his supernal root.

Sin, however, greatly impedes this process, to the point that a person can actually become separated from his spiritual root. This is the meaning of the Torah’s punishment of *karet*, which means dividing the soul from its source on high. Attachment to one’s source can be achieved through Torah study, careful fulfillment of the mitzvot, and complete repentance. Moreover, each person has his own



channel, passing from the highest world all the way down to this one, which he alone is able to bring to perfection. All the events of one's life, the challenges and the experiences, even the mitzvot one is able to fulfill, are all indispensable tools for a person to reach perfection. Lacking even one of them results in the soul's lack of perfection. In this sense, each person is "a ladder standing on the ground, with its head reaching heaven" (*Bereshit* 28:12). Though his body functions here below, his soul is attached above, connected to Hashem. This is another type of "complete *teshuvah*" that we pray for, in addition to our Yom Kippur prayers – that through our worship of Hashem in this world, we should touch the supernal source of our soul above.

Another possible explanation of "complete *teshuvah*" lies in the Torah's injunction to sanctify ourselves even in areas that are permitted. This is how Hazal understand the verse: "You shall be holy" (*Vayikra* 19:2); that is, holy and sanctified even in actions that are formally permitted by the Torah (*Yevamot* 20a). In discussing this idea, the Ramban coins the famous phrase (*Vayikra* *ibid.*) that a person can be "despicable with the permission of the Torah." For instance, a person can keep glatt kosher, yet eat like a glutton. He may be honest in business, but spend his money on every vanity in the world. Yet the Torah wants something more from us. It is not a simple matter of permitted or forbidden; rather it is the Torah's demand that we gradually ascend to a holier life – each person according to the level he is presently on. Perhaps this is the "complete *teshuvah*" that we pray for, that we can climb that endless ladder to higher states of *kedusha*, beyond the simple performance of the mitzvot or Torah study.

Another type of "complete *teshuvah*" lies in the rectification of sins in the supernal root. According to *sifrei* Kabbalah, when a person sins, he not only causes damage here in this world, he causes blemishes and deep disharmony in the supernal worlds. He creates a division in Hashem's holy Names, which stand at the foundation of creation, and he causes Hashem's light to recede from this world and from the higher ones.

Rectifying this damage is not an easy task. Even if a person fulfills the basic criteria for *teshuvah* – regret, confession of sin, and a commitment to change – he has still not erased the supernal damage caused by his actions, and it may still be necessary for him to suffer in this world and the next. To this end, the Kabbalists have prescribed various forms of penitence, which can exempt a person from the suffering of *gehinom* (*Shaar HaKavanot* p. 90c). Yet, this path is not for everyone. Only a person who has fulfilled the basic forms of *teshuvah* can take on the heavy load of *tikunim* – of fasts and self-affliction – and even then, only under the guidance of recognized Rabbis and Kabbalists.

Therefore, in the *Amidah*, we first ask: "Return us, our Father, to Your Torah, and bring us close, our King, to Your service..." Let a person first perfect himself in his



understanding of Torah, and his actions according to the letter of the law, only then can he request: “And return us in complete *teshuvah* before You” – that is, the perfection of *teshuvah*, the rectification of all that he blemished in the supernal worlds. Then he will be saved) from even the punishment of *gehinom*.

Four in One

Perhaps these four forms of “complete” *teshuvah* are what are required of us, after we have fulfilled the basic demands of *teshuvah* during the Ten Days of Repentance. However, to be honest, these “additional” forms of *teshuvah* are very high levels, and not every person can be expected to attain them. How, then, can an average person still perfect his soul?

The answer lies in the festival of Sukkot, which offers us a chance to do *teshuvah* on all four levels.

Take, for instance, the perfection of our *midot*. As is known, the seven days of Sukkot correspond to the seven *ushpizen* – the seven “guests,” one of whom we invite each night to the sukkah. These are the seven pillars of *Klal Yisrael*: Avraham, Yitzhak, Yaakov, Moshe, Aharon, Yosef and David. Each of these holy individuals perfected themselves to the utmost degree, and each developed one particular character trait which he refined above all others: Avraham – lovingkindness, Yitzhak – fear of heaven, Yaakov – truth and compassion, Moshe and Aharon – support and devotion to Torah study with love and fear of Hashem, Yosef – holiness and purity, and David – accepting the yoke of Hashem’s kingship over oneself and spreading knowledge of Hashem’s dominion over the entire world. As their descendents, each of us has the ability to perfect ourselves in these traits, and the seven days of Sukkot are a propitious time to do so. On the first day of Sukkot, we should work on being more loving, on the second day, fear of Hashem, etc.

The mitzvah of the four species also alludes to these seven, primary character traits, which correspond to the supernal sefirot – channels of Hashem’s revelation in the world. These parallel the *midot* described above. The Arizal explains (*Shaar HaKavanot* p. 105c) that the three hadasim correspond to the *sefirot* of *Hesed*, *Gevurah* and *Tiferet* – These are the *midot* of Avraham, Yitzhak and Yaakov. The two aravot correspond to *Netzah* and *Hod* (Moshe and Aharon). The lulav corresponds to *Yesod* (Yosef). And the etrog corresponds to *Malchut* (David). Thus, both the days and the mitzvot of Sukkot encourage us to work on our *midot* and achieve “complete *teshuvah*.”

As for the second form of “complete *teshuvah*” discussed above – the return to our spiritual roots – that too is implied in the holiday of Sukkot. For the Forefathers – Avraham, Yitzhak, Yaakov and the rest – did not just perfect their *midot*. They



refined themselves to the point where their souls touched Divinity; each one in his own way, and with his own specific approach. So too, we must look for that unique quality already latent within us, and develop it to the point that it shines with Hashem's light, connecting us to our supernal root.

The third path of “complete *teshuvah*” discussed above lies in the Torah's demand for holiness. “Sanctify yourself in that which is permitted” (Rashi on *Devorim* 14:21). Holiness, in the Jewish context, does not lie in abandoning the world, but in uplifting and refining it transforming physicality into spirituality. This is clearly that essence of Sukkot, when we use the “waste product of the threshing floor” (*Sukkah* 12a) as *schach* for the sukkah – old leaves, reeds, branches, and sticks; thus, elevating them from their worthless status to serve as a dwelling place for the Shechina. Likewise, the four species, which are simply branches and fruit, have the power, when bound together and shaken to the four corners of the world and above and below, to dispel harmful winds and dew, draw down spiritual abundance, and rectify the supernal worlds.

Three Levels of Teshuvah

In this sense, Sukkot is even higher and more potent than Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. Rosh Hashana is a day when we elevate the spiritual over the physical. The main mitzvah of the day – blowing the shofar – is precisely that. The breath that sounds the shofar comes from deep within us – from the depths of our soul (*Zohar*, see *Sefer HaTanya*, part I, chap. 2). The shofar may make a sound, but our contribution is all spirit.

On Yom Kippur, we ascend to an even higher level. Once we have given precedence to spirituality over physicality on Rosh Hashana, we can now transcend the material world altogether. Through the fasting and other afflictions, we ascend to the level of angels (*Yalkut Shimoni, Va'eschanan* 834), as though we had no body at all. On this day, we are all prayer, without even the “vessel” of the shofar, symbolizing the body, to sound our spirit through.

Only after having ascended to that level, can we enter the holiday of Sukkot, whose focus is to elevate the very physicality that we transcended. Through using those simple, base materials, we transform the material world into the pinnacle of holiness.

Sukkot and the Gentile Nations



This helps us to understand an amazing teaching of Hazal, found at the beginning of *masechta Avodah Zarah* (*Avodah Zarah* 2a). To paraphrase:

In the world-to-come, the Holy One will hold a *sefer* Torah and declare: “Let whoever toiled at this come and receive reward.” Immediately, all the nations will gather together in great disarray, and declare: “Master of the World! We built many markets, fixed many roads, made fortunes of money – all so that Klal Yisrael could learn Torah. We too deserve reward!” Hashem retorts: “You were fools in the previous world! You did all that for yourselves!” After much debate, Hashem gives them one last chance to do a mitzvah to receive reward. “I have one small mitzvah, known as sukkah.” He tells them. “Go and do it!” Immediately, each of them runs to make a sukkah on the roof of his house. But Hashem reveals the sun in its full power, and the day becomes extremely hot. Each gentile runs out of his sukkah, kicking it down as he leaves.

There is an obvious question we can ask here. Why does Hashem decide to test them with *this* particular mitzvah? Why not some other, easy to perform deed?

The answer lies in what we explained above. The whole purpose of Torah and mitzvot is to sanctify and uplift the physical, with sukkah being a perfect example. When a Jew looks at a sukkah, he doesn't see sticks and boards, but a dwelling place for the Shechinah, a house for the seven holy Shepherds. When he takes the four species, it's not just some odd bouquet of branches, but the four letters of Hashem's Name that he is holding.

On the other hand, the nations of the world have no connection to such spiritual concepts. Oh, it may be as they claimed, that “everything material that we built and developed in the thousands of years of exile was only for the Jews to use in serving Hashem.” How true! But from their perspective, these were only words – they didn't believe it for a minute. “You did all that for yourselves and for your world pleasures!” Hashem declared. And here is the proof. “I have one small mitzvah, known as sukkah. Go and do it!” Take the physical world and try to uplift it. See if you can be true to your own claims, that you indeed had in mind the spiritual benefit of Torah.

But, of course, they could not. It wasn't the fact that they left their sukkot when the sun became too hot that was the problem – even a Jew is allowed to do that, according to the halacha that obligates one to sit in a sukkah only so long as it is comfortable. The problem was that they kicked it on the way out. By that, they demonstrated their true feelings, that a sukkah is nothing more than sticks and boards, and that physicality is not something that can be redeemed and uplifted. Thus, their claim for reward was disproved! For a person can only be rewarded for



that which he honestly has a connection to, and devotes himself to fulfilling for Hashem's sake.

Herein lays the essential distinction between Klal Yisrael and the nations of the world. Only we have the power to sanctify the physical. The other religions of the world do not have a concept of this at all. For them, spirituality is something divorced from this world. Their priests must remain celibate, they are forbidden to drink wine or alcohol. On the other hand, lacking any connection with spirituality, the average gentile in the street goes to the other extreme. He views marriage as just another opportunity to satisfy his lusts, he eats to fill his stomach, makes money to increase his personal status. For a Jew, however, marriage is *kedushin* – holiness itself! It brings a person to completion, and allows him to bring holy children into the world. Eating is to gain strength to serve Hashem, and making money is necessary to purchase mitzvot, give tzedakah, and take care of all the other things we need in the service of Hashem. Either way, the gentile cannot relate to this concept of sanctifying the physical; either they try to eliminate it, or they fully indulge in it.

This is the essence of the holiday of Sukkot. It teaches us that a human being, though nothing more than dust and ashes, can sanctify and uplift himself and transform his very physicality into a holy vessel. Thus, the verse says: “And you shall rejoice before Hashem, your G-d” (*Vayikra* 23:40). For there is no greater joy than this, the dedication of our lives to the transforming this world into a holy sanctuary. It is the goal and purpose of the Jewish people.

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As for the fourth aspect of “complete *teshuvah*” – the rectification of sins – we will discuss that in the second part of this essay, to be presented next week.

This essay contains divre Torah. Please treat it with proper respect.