

The Diverse World of Teshuvah

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, the *refuah shlaimah* of Shoshana Elka bat Etel Dina, Devorah bat Chana, Chaya Mindel bat Leah Basha and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

If you ask most Jews, “What is the name of the next holy day after Rosh Hashanah,” they would probably respond with, “Yom Kippur.” They would answer in this fashion, since it is the popular name for this *Yom Tov* (Festival Day), even though the appellation, “Yom Kippur” is nowhere to be found in Tanach. Instead, on two occasions in *Sefer Vayikra*, we encounter the expressions, “*Yom HaKippurim*” and “*b’Yom HaKippurim:*”

But on the tenth of this seventh month [Tishrei], it is a day of atonement (*Yom HaKippurim*), it shall be a holy occasion for you; you shall afflict yourselves, and you shall offer up a fire offering to the L-rd. (23:27, all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

You shall proclaim [with] the shofar blasts, in the seventh month, on the tenth of the month; on the Day of Atonement (*b’Yom HaKippurim*), you shall sound the shofar throughout your land. (25:9)

My *rebbe* and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, was intrigued by the Torah’s use of the plural construct “*kippurim*,” (“atonements”) rather than “*kippur*” (“atonement”). As such, he asked, “Why does the Torah refer to the day in the plural, as *Yom ha-Kippurim*?” (This, and the following quotations of the Rav, are from, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Darosh Darash Yosef: Discourses of Rav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik on the Weekly Parashah*,” Rabbi Avishai C. David, editor, pages 258-260) The Rav’s initial response sets the tone for his

overall analysis: “The answer is that one may do *teshuvah* [the process and act of repentance] in many ways, and G-d accepts all of them.” This statement is conceptually based upon the following Talmudic passage:

Reish Lakish said: “Great is repentance, for because of it, premeditated sins are accounted as errors, as it is said: “Return, O Israel, to the L-rd your G-d, for you have stumbled in your iniquity.” (*Sefer Hoshea* 14:2) “Iniquity” is premeditated, and yet he [Hoshea] calls it “stumbling!” But that is not so! For Reish Lakish said [at a different time] that repentance is so great that premeditated sins are accounted as though they were merits, as it is said: And when a wicked man repents of his wickedness and performs justice and righteousness, he shall live because of them.” (*Sefer Yechezkel* 33:14) That is no contradiction: One refers to a case [of *teshuvah*] derived from love [*teshuvah me-ahavah* wherein sins are accounted as merits], the other to one due to fear [*teshuvah mi-yirah* wherein sins are accounted as errors]. (*Talmud Bavli, Yoma* 86b, translation, *Soncino Talmud* with my brackets and emendations)

The Rav summarizes and expands upon this passage in a manner that significantly informs our understanding of the varieties of *teshuvah*:

...one may do *teshuvah* in many ways, and G-d accepts all of them. *Teshuvah* may be sincere, turbulent, or exultant. Whether it is *teshuvah me-ahavah* – repentance motivated by love – or *teshuvah mi-yirah* – repentance motivated by fear – G-d in His mercy accepts it. The plural phrase, “*Yom ha-Kippurim*” reflects the diverse world of *teshuvah* whether it arises from reflection, joy or sadness. (Underlining my own)

I believe the Rav’s phrase, “the diverse world of *teshuvah*,” does a great deal to advance our comprehension of *teshuvah* and, by extension, *Yom HaKippurim*. *Teshuvah* is not a “one size fits all” experience. Instead, just like the Jewish people is comprised of many different kinds of individuals, *teshuvah* is pluralistic in nature. As such, *Yom HaKippurim* itself, wherein “the *mitzvat ha-yom* (the *mitzvah* of the day) is *teshuvah*,” (p. 258) is equally multifaceted in nature. Therefore, no two people share the exact same experience of this exceptionally holy day, since for some, *teshuvah me-ahavah* is the order of the moment, and for others, *teshuvah mi-yirah*. The key is that the Master of the Universe accepts all

varieties of *teshuvah*, as long as they represent a heartfelt desire to re-encounter and reconnect with Him.

The prophet Hoshea declared long ago, “Return, O Israel, to the L-rd your G-d, for you have stumbled in your iniquity.” (14:2) With Hashem’s help, and our fervent passion to reunite with Him, may this *Yom ha-Kippurim* be the time when we undertake the *teshuvah* process, each in our own unique way, and thereby merit the fulfillment of the verse, “You are children of the L-rd, your G-d...” (*Sefer Devarim* 14:1) *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Kativah v’chatimah tovah! Tizku l’shanim rabot!

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They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha’s name.

The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik’s English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on this link: <http://bit.ly/2jrPl2V>.