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Teshuvah: Using Our Minds for What Matters

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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, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

This is the time of year when our friends ask us: “How are you? Are you ready for another Rosh Hashanah? Can you believe its Rosh Hashanah again?” These, and similar kinds of questions, are “on the mark” and exactly where our thoughts should be. Please allow me to explain. “How are you?” can be taken as just another blasé social pleasantry - or something far more. In fact, I believe we can view it as a modern day restatement of Hashem’s question to Adam after he violated the one mitzvah that G-d had given him:

Now the L-rd G-d took the man, and He placed him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to guard it. And the L-rd G-d commanded man, saying, “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat. But of the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat of it, for on the day that you eat thereof, you shall surely die.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 2:15-17, this, and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Unfortunately, Adam and Eve violated this lone commandment: “And the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to the eyes, and the tree was desirable to make one wise; so she took of its fruit, and she ate, and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.” (Ibid. , 3:6) This, in turn, led the Almighty to ask: “Where are you?” (Ibid. , 3:9) Of course, G-d knew full well where Adam and Eve were physically located. Therefore, what was the Holy One Blessed be He, so to speak, really asking?

In my view, G-d put forth an existential question, or perhaps, the existential question:

“Now that you have sinned against Me, what is your place within the great scheme of Creation? What is your value to the world, now that you have torn our covenant asunder?” In short, Hashem was asking some of the very same questions we should be asking ourselves as we approach Rosh Hashanah.

These types of questions should motivate us to pause and reflect upon our past actions. In addition, they should radically disturb our complacency, and thereby spur us on to substantive and depth-level change. In sum, they should lead us to the only logical conclusion for a spiritually sensitive person – it is time to do *teshuvah* (the act of returning to G-d). What is *teshuvah*? The Rambam (1135-1204) devoted an entire section of his halachic *magnum opus*, *Mishneh Torah*, to answering this question. His response forms the conceptual basis of this cathartic and spiritually cleansing process until our own time:

What exactly is *teshuvah*? [It is the act that demands] the sinner to reject his sin, remove it from his thoughts, and determine in his mind that he will never do it again...So, too, he must feel badly for what he has done in the past...and he must bear testimony to He who knows all secret matters that he will never repeat this sin again... In addition, he must verbally confess [his sin] and speak aloud of those things he has determined in his mind. (*Hilchot Teshuvah* 2:2)

Let us summarize the *teshuvah* process as delineated by Maimonides:

1. Rejection of the sin: takes place in the present (*azivat hacheit*)
2. Feel badly about what has been done: refers to past actions (*charata al ha'avar*)
3. Resolve to change: refers to the future (*kabbalah al he'atid*)
4. Declare and confess (verbally) to Hashem to never be involved in this sin again (*vidui devarim*)

As we can readily see, authentic *teshuvah* is a holistic process that involves the individual's entire being. It incorporates a radical shift in the mind of the sinner, so that

he will be able to return to the proper path of serving Hashem. It requires unflinching honesty, and the strength to conquer the natural tendency to rationalize one's actions and behaviors. In addition, the *baal teshuvah* (master of *teshuvah*) needs to feel badly about what he has done, reject his prior behavior, and resolve never to repeat this action in the future. All of this must be accompanied by a genuine oral confession before Hashem of what he has done, and his determination never to repeat this action again. This, then, is the Maimonidean concept of doing *teshuvah*.

While the Hebrew months of Elul and Tishrei (the two months that precede and incorporate Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur) are the times wherein the obligation of doing *teshuvah* comes to the fore, it is actually an essential part of our daily prayer experience. Regrettably, it is often difficult for many of us to fully focus on what we are saying when we are praying. We are filled with concerns about many different matters and obligations that prevent us from concentrating upon the content and meaning of our prayers. Quite often, we do not even remember that the fifth *bracha* (blessing) of the *Shemoneh Esrei* (*Amidah* or Silent Prayer) focuses upon, and is entitled, “*Teshuvah*.”

Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, translates the aforementioned blessing in the following manner: “Bring us back, our Father, to your Torah. Draw us near, our King, to Your service. Lead us back to You in perfect repentance. Blessed are You, L-rd, who desires repentance.” (*The Koren Siddur*: Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks Edition, page 114) A brief analysis of this *bracha* reveals the following:

1. The active agent of *teshuvah* is G-d.
2. There are three verbs that encapsulate our request to the Almighty in regards to

- teshuvah*: “bring,” “draw,” and “lead.”
3. G-d is referred to as “our Father,” “our King,” and as “L-rd.” (*yud - kay - vav - kay*)
 4. G-d, Himself (so to speak), is desirous of our doing *teshuvah*.

It is crucial to note that this blessing is one of the *bakashot* (requests) in the *Shemoneh Esrei* with which we beseech Hashem. Therefore, everything we state therein is directed to G-d and His role in the *teshuvah* process. While this seems to negate our dynamic involvement in the act of doing *teshuvah*, nothing could be further from the truth. The Rambam’s presentation of the individual’s active involvement is completely intact. What emerges, however, is the crucial notion that *teshuvah* is a collaborative process between G-d and Man. Thus, as our liturgy so often states, Hashem is truly He who “extends His hand in *teshuvah*” to bring us near to Him. We, in turn, however, are the stewards of the process itself and thereby responsible, with His help, for its implementation and actualization.

Fascinatingly, “Knowledge,” the blessing wherein we beg G-d to bestow knowledge (*da’at*) upon us, and teach us understanding (*binah*), precedes the *bracha* of *teshuvah*:

You grace humanity with knowledge. And teach mortals understanding. Grace us with the knowledge, understanding, and discernment that come from You. Blessed are You, L-rd, who graciously grants knowledge. (Ibid.)

The blessing of “Forgiveness” (“*slicha*”) follows the *bracha* of *teshuvah*. This is a natural progression, since the ultimate goal of *teshuvah* is the attainment of complete forgiveness:

Forgive us, our Father, for we have sinned. Pardon us, our King, for we have transgressed; for You pardon and forgive. Blessed are You, L-rd, the gracious One who repeatedly forgives. (Ibid.)

The first three *berachot* of the *bakasha* (request) section of the *Shemoneh Esrei* may now be seen as comprising a tightly interwoven conceptual unit: Knowledge leads to *teshuvah* which, in turn, leads to forgiveness. Clearly, the intellectual gesture is the fundamental component of the *teshuvah*-forgiveness nexus. It enables us to ascertain where we have gone wrong, and serves as a guidepost for our future actions. As Rabbeinu Shimshon Rafael Hirsch *zatzal* (1808-1888) pointed out in his *Commentary on the Siddur*, understanding (*binah*) “is the insight into the interrelationships of things, to be gained by logical judgment.” This is precisely what we need in order to become fully engaged in the *teshuvah* process. *Binah*, however, is not naturally acquired. It requires a single-minded dedication and drive to perfect the human condition. It is for this reason that Rav Hirsch stated: “The acquisition of *binah* requires strenuous effort to which man may not be equal and for which he may well lack the strength; for this reason he cannot attain *binah* without the help of G-d.”

Teshuvah may now be viewed as a process and act that demands mindfulness and total intellectual engagement. As such, let us pray to Hashem that He will partner with us in the acquisition of *binah*, so that we may join with Him to become new and better individuals. After all, this is precisely the intent of Jeremiah’s famous and stirring words in *Megilat Eichah* 5:21, wherein we implore our Creator to help us return unto Him: *Hashiveinu Hashem alecha v’nashuvah chadash yemeinu k’kedem* (Restore us to You, O L-rd, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old.). With G-d’s help, may we have the knowledge, understanding, desire, and intent to fulfill this prayer. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Kativa v'chatimah tovah and tizku l'shanim rabot.

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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 rdbe718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah and Analysis*,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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