

The Path To Follow

Ha'azinu

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Return, O Israel, to Hashem Your G-d

This world is like a huge department store that someone walks into, but looks in every direction without finding something to buy. Upon leaving he is asked, "Is it true that you couldn't find something to buy in such a large store?" This leaves him confused.

Likewise man, who descends into this world with a lofty soul and equipped with hands, feet, eyes, and so forth, asks what he must do in this world. He is told, "There are many things to do in this world. There is Torah, mitzvot, good deeds, eating and drinking, and having enjoyment."

However he walks around as much as he wants without buying. When it comes time to die, he ascends to Heaven and is asked: "Is it possible that you brought nothing with you – no mitzvah?" Confused by this, he responds: "I didn't have the time."

This is what the prophet is speaking about when he says, "Return, O Israel, to Hashem Your G-d" (Hosea 14:2) – return to Hashem so as never to be confused. Hashem shows us great kindness, for instead of us having to ask Him for forgiveness, He asks us to return to Him, for all the gates are opened to us.

Nevertheless, man does not pay attention to this. He takes a vacation in this world, to places where in previous times only the wealthy would go, and yet today the poor go there as well.

A person must realize that even the simplest individual, one who has committed many sins and is completely detached from G-d, can reach a level higher than that of a tzaddik if he repents. Through repentance, he can draw close to Hashem, Who will welcome him with open arms.

As the Rambam says, "Whereas just recently they were repulsive to G-d, despicable, far removed and abominable, they are now beloved and desired, close and intimate" (Hilchot Teshuvah 7:6). We can easily do teshuvah in one of two ways:

1. Hashem wished to confer merit upon the Children of Israel, which is why He multiplied Torah and mitzvot for them (Makkot 23b; Avot D'Rabbi Nathan 41:17). This means that if we fulfill even a single mitzvah to perfection, we will automatically end up fulfilling all the other mitzvot, in which case we will be clean and pure, able to do complete teshuvah.

2. The human soul is a divine spark, and this spark awakens man to teshuvah and good deeds. Even if he is an evildoer, he remains attached to Hashem by means of this spark, and he must rid himself of forgetfulness, think about G-d, and return to Him.

We need to understand this. If forgetfulness causes man to forget G-d, why did He create him with the ability to forget, which can lead to sin? Better to remember than forget!

We must realize that there are two kinds of forgetfulness: The first comes from Hashem, its goal being for man to forget the day of death, as the Sages have said: "Seven things are hidden from men. They are: The day of death..." (Pesachim 54b). This is because if people were to always have the day of death on their mind, they would not perform mitzvot because they would be constantly saddened at the thought of dying. Such forgetfulness enables a person to forget his misfortunes, allowing him to fulfill mitzvot.

There is another kind of forgetfulness, one that comes from the evil inclination: It makes a person forget that there is punishment and death. If one continues to sin without repenting, that is the worst kind of forgetfulness.

Hence when the month of Elul arrives, the evil inclination tries to make a person forget the day of judgment, in which case he has no fear of it.

In order for him to begin feeling it, he must consider himself as a tourist in this world, not a permanent resident. He must always remember that someone is calling him to repent: "Return, O Israel, to Hashem Your G-d" (Hosea 14:2).

When he remembers this, he will automatically want to do teshuvah. However if he waits for Hashem to call him, his fate will be bitter, for who knows just how low he will sink before Hashem wakes him up and lifts him out of the abyss! Better for him to remember on his own and do teshuvah.

This allows us to understand a statement made by our Sages: "Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel argued for two and a half years, the former asserting that it would have been better for man not to have been created than to have been created. The latter maintained that it is better for man to have been created than not to have been created. They finally took a vote and decided that it would have been better for man not to have been created than to have been created. Yet now that he has been created, let him examine his past deeds" (Eruvin 13b).

We may explain this disagreement in the following way: Those who believed that it would have been better for man not to have been created, namely the followers of Shammai, held this view because of the existence of forgetfulness in the world, since forgetfulness leads people to not serving Hashem correctly. Better not to forget, but to constantly recall the day of death, for in this way man can do G-d's will and repent if he constantly recalls the day of death. Yet since the evil inclination makes him forget all this, better for man not to have been created.

However those who believed that it was better for man to have been created, namely the followers of Hillel, held this view because man can overcome the evil inclination and forgetfulness. Since this is a serious obstacle, they concluded, it would have been better for man not to have been created. Yet now that he has been created, let him examine his deeds and realize that there is nothing of permanence in this world. Let him constantly fear the judgment and return to G-d with all his heart.

Man must remember that G-d judges him for every moment in which he can perform a mitzvah but does not. We know the question which the Vilna Gaon raised on the Mishnah, "Before Whom you are destined to give an account and reckoning" (Pirkei Avoth 3:1), namely why it employs both words: din and cheshbon. The answer is that din (account) deals with sin per se, whereas cheshbon (reckoning) deals with each time that a person could have fulfilled a mitzvah, for he is judged on that as well.

This is very serious, for it has been taught that sin can do as much damage as a match: Just as a single match can set an entire field ablaze, likewise a single sin can destroy everything, and conversely a single mitzvah can save everything. That is why teshuvah has such tremendous power.

As proof of this, we may cite the well-known story of Rabbi Elazar ben Dordia (Avodah Zarah 17a), who wanted to sin with a certain prostitute from one of the cities by the sea. He took a money-bag filled with dinars and crossed seven rivers to reach her. At the time of the deed, she breathed out and said: "Just as this breath will never return to its place, Elazar ben Dordia's repentance will never be accepted."

Upon hearing this, he went to sit between two hills and asked them to plead for mercy on his behalf. However they refused, for they first had to plead for mercy on their own behalf, as it is written: "For the mountains shall depart and the hills shall falter" (Isaiah 54:10). Likewise heaven and earth did not wish to plead for him either, for they had to plead for themselves, as it is written: "For the heavens shall vanish like smoke, and the earth shall wear out like a garment" (ibid. 51:6). The sun and moon refused as well, for they also had to plead for themselves, as it is written: "Then shall the moon be confounded and the sun shamed" (ibid.

24:23). The stars and constellations refused in a similar manner.

He finally concluded, "The matter depends upon me alone," and so he placed his head between his knees and wept until his soul left his body. A Heavenly voice then proclaimed, "Rabbi Elazar ben Dordia is destined for the life of the World to Come!"

This is difficult to understand. The woman in this story was a grave sinner, so how could she lecture him? The answer is that she herself suddenly wished to repent upon seeing how Elazar ben Dordia was rushing into sin. She knew that he wasn't doing good, and that the evil inclination was behind it all.

Hence she sincerely wanted to repent, and in this way she was able to make him do teshuvah.

Thus just as we can commit a sin with all our heart, we can also perform a mitzvah with all our heart. Indeed, we need courage and devotion to achieve true teshuvah.

Concerning the Parsha

All the People Sinned Through Ignorance

The students were sitting in a semi-circle, listening to a lecture by the gaon Rabbi Abdallah Somech Zatzal. It was the great Zilcha Beit HaMidrash, located in the center of Baghdad, and these students were talmidei chachamim in their own right, great and well-known scholars. Among them was Rabbi Yosef Haim Zatzal (the author of Ben Ish Hai) and the gaon Rabbi Eliyahu Mani Zatzal (who later became the Rav of Hevron).

All of a sudden, appearing just at the edge of the Beit HaMidrash, were three officers from the local police station. They stayed there for a long time, quite embarrassed, reluctantly looking inside. They finally returned by the way they came, disappearing as if they were never there. During the years that Rabbi Abdallah Somech served as the Rav of Baghdad, he managed to render honor to the Torah. He established a yeshiva to which students flocked from the entire region, with a nearby Beit HaMidrash gavoha that granted smicha to dozens of rabbis. Over the course of the years, this network extended to all the Jewish communities of Iraq and Kurdistan.

Halachic questions were addressed to Rabbi Abdallah Somech from every country in North Africa, and even from rabbis in Europe. They asked him for approvals for their books, as well as for his opinion on various halachic questions. The Arabs of Baghdad also respected this Rav of the Jews.

During that time, a Jew from the Baghdad community was ensnared in a vile plot, meant to completely ruin his business and imprison him for a long time. The episode lasted some time, until finally the matter reached the desk of the wali, the governor of the city.

The governor decided that the accused had to swear on his learning to prove his innocence. The Jew took an oath, and as a result he won his case. The Jews of Baghdad felt that their friend had foiled the plot hatched against him.

However their joy did not please a certain Mussa, who was well-known in the city. This Mussa, none other than a Jew by the name of Moshe who had converted to Islam, never missed an opportunity to harass his former brothers.

He went to see the governor of Baghdad, to whom he secretly revealed the "trickery" of the Jews: "Know that oaths taken by Jews are completely meaningless. At the beginning of each year, they gather in their synagogues and publicly proclaim that they are annulling in advance all the vows and oaths which they will be taking in the coming year. This method is especially known to trick other peoples, among whom they live."

Mussa's words wormed their way into the heart of the governor, who felt that he had been deceived and ridiculed by a Jewish trick, a feeling that quickly turned into anger. He demanded an immediate explanation for this Jewish custom from the Rav of Baghdad himself. The three officers at the Beit HaMidrash had therefore come to summon Rabbi Abdallah Somech to the governor's office.

Yet when these officers saw the impressive sight of the Rav sitting down and surrounded by his disciples, who were avidly drinking in his words, they were afraid. "The man that you sent us to summon seems more like an angel of G-d than a man," they said with fear upon returning to the governor.

Boiling with anger, the governor again sent these three officers, this time warning them that if they didn't return with the Rav of a Jew, their fate would be bitter.

Their heads lowered, the policemen approached Rabbi Abdallah Somech and conveyed the governor's message to him. The Rav got up, arranged his clothes, and left to see the governor.

When the Rav's disciples saw that he had interrupted his lecture to leave, they all accompanied him. Numerous other Jews who were passing by also joined this honorable group of men, at the head of which was the Rav.

The governor, who was looking out of his window and impatiently awaiting the arrival of the Rav of the Jews, was stunned by what he saw. A large swarm of people was slowly approaching his office. It was only when they were nearby that he realized they consisted of a group accompanying the Rav.

Signs of embarrassment appeared on his face as he went to greet the Rav. The great honor that the Rav was being shown, as well as the nobility of his face, had softened the governor's heart. He held out his hand to Rabbi Abdallah and politely led him into his office, allowing his followers to enter as well.

It was as if the governor had forgotten the reason for why he summoned the Rav, for he began to speak about the state of the Jewish community in Baghdad. From there, the conversation turned to various issues, and the governor did not hide his astonishment at the wisdom of Rabbi Abdallah's words.

It was only as the end, with obvious hesitation and almost in passing, that the governor asked if it were true that Jews annul the validity of their oaths in advance, thereby allowing themselves to make false oaths. Rabbi Abdallah, who fully understood what was lurking behind the entire conversation, smiled wide. He asked one of those present to bring him a machzor [festival prayer book]. When it was brought to him, he opened it to the page containing the Kol Nidrei prayer.

The Rav explained to the governor, "This prayer begins with the words: 'All vows, obligations, oaths...' and ends with the words 'because all the people sinned through ignorance.' We only annul oaths that have left our mouths by mistake, and only vows and oaths concerning religion, not concerning financial matters."

The governor immediately excused himself for this embarrassing exchange, quickly changing the subject. He then said goodbye to the Rav with a warm and prolonged handshake.

From then on, the governor became a personal friend of Rabbi Abdallah Somech. He would often go to see him, especially on Shabbat and the holidays, to discuss what was happening in the world and to seek his advice on delicate state matters. During that time, Jews experienced a period of peace in Baghdad.

Even on Shabbat

It is written, “Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak, and let the earth hear the words of my mouth” (Devarim 32:1).

The Chatam Sofer gives an allegorical explanation for what the Midrash says on this week’s parsha, “Is it permissible for a Jew suffering from an earache to heal it on Shabbat? The Sages have taught: Where there is the least question of danger to life, Shabbat laws are suspended” (Devarim Rabba 10:1). He notes that the poskim have discussed whether one may recite vidui on Shabbat. Is it enjoyable or upsetting for one to mention his many sins on Shabbat?

According to this explanation, we may question whether a talmid chacham who is giving a class on Shabbat may admonish someone, for admonishments are difficult to hear and may upset people. Yet during Shabbat Shuvah, say the commentators, when we can rectify all that has been damaged during the Shabbats of the year, not to do so represents a kind of “danger to life,” for it is either now or never. Hence rabbis usually speak words of Mussar on Shabbat Shuvah.

We learn this custom from Moshe Rabbeinu, who died on Shabbat. On that same day, he admonished the Children of Israel and spoke words of Mussar to them, words that appear in Parsha Ha’azinu.

This is the meaning of the Midrash’s statement, “Is it permissible for a Jew suffering from an earache” – one who has not heard reprimands and admonishment - “to heal it on Shabbat?” Here the Midrash says that “Where there is the least question of danger to life, Shabbat laws are suspended,” meaning that it is a sacred duty to speak words of Mussar and encouragement, even on Shabbat.

I Will Heal Them

It is written, “I will kill and I will bring life. I struck and I will heal” (Devarim 32:39).

Why does the verse use the term amit (“I will kill”) in the future tense, while at same time using the term machatzti (“I struck”), which is in the past tense? Better to say, “I will kill and I will bring to life. I will strike down and I will heal.”

The author of Ohr Moshe answers this question according to the Chida in Sefat HaNachal, who cites the Sages in the Gemara: “They shall be resurrected with their defects” – in the state in which they died (infirm, blind, deaf, etc.), in order to be recognizable – “and then be healed” (Sanhedrin 91b). Thus the verse states: “I will kill and I will bring life” – even when the dead are resurrected, they will be as before, as “I struck” them. It is only afterwards that “I will heal” – I will heal them in the future.

Forgetfulness

It is written, “You ignored the Rock, Who gave birth to you” (Devarim 32:18).

On the fundamental practicality of forgetfulness, Rabbeinu Bechaye writes in Chovot HaLevavot that without it, man would be in a constant state of despair. No joy would be able to lift him

out of such despair, for he would derive no benefit from anything when he recalls the misfortunes he experienced in the past. He would also have no hope of ever finding rest from one who hates him. Since he will never forget the reason for his hostility, he will spend his entire life fearing him.

By the Merit of Torah

It is written, “Through this matter shall you lengthen your days” (Devarim 32:47).

One day a certain woman, bitter and brokenhearted, went to the Beit HaMidrash of the Turei Zahav. Panic-stricken, she cried out: “My lord, my son is so weak that he’s about to die!” He said to her, “Am I in the place of G-d?” The woman replied, “I’m crying out and beseeching the Torah that is within my lord, for the Holy One, blessed be He, and the Torah are one.” He said to her, “This is what I’m going to do for you: The Torah that I study, from now on I am giving it to your son as a gift. Perhaps he will live by this merit, for it is written: ‘Through this matter shall you lengthen your days.’” At that point, the boy started to get better.

In the Light of the Parsha

Learning from the Heavens and the Earth

It is written, “Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak, and let the earth hear the words of my mouth” (Devarim 32:1).

In the Midrash our Sages teach, “The Holy One, Blessed is He, said to Israel: ‘Look at the heavens, which I created to serve you. Have they ever changed their ways? Has the sphere of the sun ever failed to rise from the east to illuminate the entire world, as it is stated: “The sun rises and the sun sets” [Kohelet 1:5]? Look at the earth, which I created to serve you. Has it ever changed its ways? Have you ever planted what it did not grow? Or have you ever planted wheat and it yielded barley? Now, they [the heavens and the earth] were created with neither reward nor loss in mind – for if they are meritorious [by fulfilling their purpose for which I created them], they nevertheless do not receive a reward, and they are not punished if they sin. Nevertheless, they have never changed their ways! How much more should you [fulfill My will], for you will be rewarded if you are meritorious and punished if you sin’” (Sifri 32:1).

This teaches us that man must make a logical inference from the earth: If the elements, which possess no understanding, still do the will of G-d and rejoice in doing His will as they sing before Him – and not only that, but Mount Sinai trembled when the Shechinah descended upon it – how much more should we fear G-d, for we possess a soul that originates from beneath the Throne of Glory, a soul that is a divine spark!

If someone says that this is not a fair comparison because inanimate objects do not possess an evil inclination, the answer is that G-d showed this to the Children of Israel at the giving of the Torah, when Mount Sinai trembled. He said to them, “Although I have placed the evil inclination in you, I have now given you the Torah as its antidote, and it will instill the fear of G-d in you.”

Regarding Teshuvah and Yom Kippur

Jealousy Among the Sages

The Rav of Jerusalem, the gaon Rabbi Yosef Haim Sonnenfeld Zatzal, spoke in a special way: "I have never been affected by jealousy. Yet who am I really jealous of? The Sha'agat Aryeh."

Why? It is said that at the time of his passing, rabbis and community leaders gathered in the Sha'agat Aryeh's room. He was lying in bed, and from time to time he asked for a particular tractate so he could look through it. He leafed through each tractate that came into his hands, then he would ask for another. One of the leaders of the community asked the shamash, who was handing books to the Rav, to hand him Ma'avar Yabok instead of a Gemara. In this way he would be able to say vidui and other prayers before his soul passed away. When the Sha'agat Aryeh realized what was happening, he smiled and said: "Not only had I no time to sin, but no time to even think of sinning. When could I have had time to sin?"

"I'm jealous of such a confession," said Rabbi Chaim Sonnenfeld with emotion.

Who Did Not Make me a Gentile

The book Uvdot VeHanagot Brisk cites the following story from Rabbi Zev Rosengarten Zatzal: One morning, as the gaon Rabbi Baruch Ber Zatzal returned home, he met a worker at his front door who had come to repair something. The Rav greeted him in Polish, and the worker smiled.

The Rav asked the Rebbetzin to find out why the worker had smiled when he said good morning to him. The worker told her, "The Rav thought that I was a gentile and he greeted me in Polish. I'm a Jew, and he could have greeted me in Yiddish." When Rabbi Baruch Ber heard this, he began to tremble. He implored the worker to forgive him, for he had repented of his deed. The worker could not understand what there was to forgive, since the Rav hadn't upset him in any way. Rabbi Baruch then explained to him the difference between a Jew and a Gentile, and the greatness of the former. When he saw that the worker understood, but forgave him all the same, he settled down.

Thoughts of Teshuvah

One morning after Shacharit, Rabbi M. Bernstein Zatzal realized that his son-in-law, the gaon Rabbi Baruch Ber Zatzal, was pale. When he asked him how he was, Rabbi Baruch Ber said that he was greatly shaken, for he was afraid that he had issued an invalid get [divorce document]. "Why do you think that?" he asked. Rabbi Baruch Ber replied that on that day, he had found among his books a seal from the Karmayog synagogue, where the Kamenitz yeshiva had exiled itself. He was therefore a thief. Now while passing through the city of Minsk, he had been asked to help issue a get, and there is an opinion that if a sin exists among one of the judges issuing a get, it is rendered invalid!

Rabbi Baruch Ber did not calm down until he remembered that while on the road from Karmayog to Vilna, a band of robbers had attacked him. He had therefore recited vidui and repented with all his might. Since he had done teshuvah and there was no way to return the book, he was therefore not an evildoer.

I Never Rebelled Against You

One of the disciples of the gaon Rabbi Yechezkel Abramsky Zatzal recounted that he once heard the gaon saying with great enthusiasm, at the conclusion of Yom Kippur: "When I went to sleep last night, on Yom Kippur, I said to Hashem: 'Master of the universe, forgive me. Even if my sins are numerous, I never rebelled against You. I sinned by mistake,

never out of rebellion, and one who never rebels against the king is a faithful servant. That is why the King will forgive His faithful servant.'"

Return Us, Our Father, to Your Torah

The gaon and tzaddik Rabbi Chaim Brim Zatzal recounted, "I remember that on one occasion, I was with the Chazon Ish Zatzal when he served as the Shaliach Tzibur on the day of his mother's yahrtzeit. During the chazara, when the Chazon Ish reached the blessing, 'Return us, our Father, to Your Torah,' at the words 'return us with complete teshuvah before You,' he burst into tears that melted the heart, like someone who truly had to do teshuvah." – Marbeh Chaim

His Blood Pressure Rose On its Own

In the introduction to the book Lev Eliyahu by the gaon Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian Zatzal, it is said that when he had to undergo an operation for his eyes, his blood pressure rose dramatically in the middle of the operation, putting his life in great danger. In fact he had to remain hospitalized for several weeks thereafter, but thank G-d he survived. The doctor sought to exonerate himself, saying that he was not responsible for the blood pressure rise in the middle of the operation. He had conducted several tests beforehand, and everything was normal. He just didn't understand why his blood pressure had spiked.

Several years later Rabbi Eliyahu required another operation, which went well. When his students came to visit him, he said to them: "You certainly remember that during my last eye operation, I was in grave danger. The reason was because I had to be unconscious for the operation, and I thought that I was going to be judged in Heaven at that point. I therefore did teshuvah, thinking about my past deeds from the time I was 12 years old to the present time. Naturally, my blood pressure rose on its own, which is why I was in danger. For this operation I thought of nothing at all, and thank G-d everything went well."

Something Good Each Day

At the end of Yom Kippur, a youngster went to see the Chazon Ish with a question: "Yesterday, at the end of the Neila prayer, there was a great awakening in the yeshiva. Yet a few minutes later, we had barely finished praying and the one leading Ma'ariv began with the melody of an ordinary day [vehu rachum...]. What's this abrupt change, without any transition?"

If that's the way people do things, what's the use of Yom Kippur?"

The Chazon Ish's response, which is found in the book Ma'aseh Ish, went as follows: "We are not asked to be angels, for our fall would be even greater from there. We must only improve things and place ourselves on the right path. We do not have the strength to completely change direction. Each day, especially on Yom Kippur, we must be committed to improving something within ourselves by putting an effort into doing something good. We are not being asked for more than that."

Guard Your Tongue

Even if Completely True

It is forbidden to speak Lashon Harah even if it is completely true, and even if it is not said in the presence of the subject. In fact if the speaker were to say the same thing in front of the subject, it would still be forbidden. How much more so if the speaker has the audacity to say, in the subject's presence, "you said this" or "you did that." The sin is much worse in that case, for it arouses tremendous hatred among the parties involved, who will consider what they have heard as entirely true, meaning that the subject actually did what the speaker said he did. Otherwise, the speaker would have never mentioned it in his presence. – Chafetz Chaim

