

PARSHA

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SEIZE THE MOMENT

It is written, “You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem your G-d: The leaders of your tribes, your elders, and your officers” (Devarim 29:9).

According to the holy Zohar, the expression, “You are standing today” refers to Rosh Hashanah. On this day, everyone stands before the Creator to be judged. The Mishnah states, “On Rosh Hashanah all creatures pass before Him like children of Maron, as it says, ‘He Who fashions their hearts together, Who comprehends all their deeds’ [Tehillim 33:15]” (Rosh Hashanah 16a). The Gemara asks, “What is the meaning of the expression like children of Maron?” It responds: “Like a flock of sheep” (ibid. 18a). Here Rashi explains: “Like sheep that are counted in order to give a tithe, and they go one after the other through a narrow opening by which only one can pass.” Rabbi bar Chana said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan, “They are all viewed with a simple glance” (Rosh Hashanah 18a).

I have the impression that “with a simple glance” can be compared to going through a body scanner. G-d examines each of us on the day of judgment: He probes our innards and scrutinizes our hearts to verify that we have truly repented and agree to return to Him from now on, to adhere to His holy Torah and fulfill His commandments – or if we are still infused with our abominations and no positive change has taken place within us. In fact it is essential for teshuvah to stem from the depths of the heart, for us to experience true regret for our past misdeeds and a commitment to no longer being so irresponsible in the future. However it is not enough to simply say, “I’ve erred, I’m guilty, I’ve sinned,” without it coming from our heart. Thus the Rambam writes, “What constitutes teshuvah? That a sinner should abandon his sins and remove them from his thoughts, resolving in his heart to never commit them again, as it states: ‘Let the wicked one forsake his way’ [Isaiah 55:7]. Similarly, he must regret the past, as it states: ‘After I returned, I regretted’ [Jeremiah 31:18]. [He must reach the level at which] He Who knows what is hidden will testify that he will never return to this sin again” (Hilchot Teshuvah 2:2). The Rambam continues: “Anyone who verbalizes his confession without resolving in his heart to abandon [sin] can be compared to [a person] who immerses himself [in a mikveh] with a lizard in his hand. This principle is implied by the statement, ‘He who confesses and forsakes [his sins] will be granted mercy’ [Mishlei 28:13]” (Hilchot Teshuvah 2:3).

I’ve found a beautiful allusion to the Rambam’s words in the verses, “You will return ad [unto] Hashem your G-d and hearken to His voice” (Devarim 4:30) and, “Return, Israel, ad [unto] Hashem your G-d” (Hosea 14:2) – the term ad (“unto”) being composed of the same letters as the term da (“know”) and ed (“witness”). Thus we must repent until G-d witnesses our complete return unto Him from the wrong path, and our clear knowledge (yedia) of His greatness.

Rabbi David Pinto Chlita

We should realize that it is neither evident nor right for G-d to readily accept and forgive the sins of those who return to Him. This is actually a gift from Heaven that comes from the goodness of Hashem, Who in His great compassion is ready to erase our sins, forgive us, and accept everyone who repents – but only if they have sincerely regretted their misdeeds and are committed to no longer taking the wrong path. Our Sages have said, “Rabbi Pinchas examined the verse, ‘Good and upright is Hashem, therefore He guides sinners on the way’ [Tehillim 25:8]: If He is good, it is because He is upright. And if He is upright, it is because He is good! ‘Therefore He guides sinners along the way’ – He shows them the path of repentance, for He acts with goodness and mercy, over and above the strict measure of the law. They asked wisdom, ‘What is the punishment of the sinner?’ Wisdom replied, ‘Evil pursues sinners’ [Mishlei 13:21]. They asked prophecy, ‘What is the punishment of the sinner?’ Prophecy replied, ‘The soul that sins, it shall die’ [Ezekiel 18:4]. Then they asked the Holy One, blessed be He, ‘What is the punishment of the sinner?’ He replied, ‘Let him repent and he will find atonement’” (Yerushalmi, Makkot 2:6). Thus from the perspective of wisdom and prophesy, the sinner has no way of rectifying his misdeeds. However Hashem acts over and above the strict measure of the law and accepts his repentance. Not only that, but He shows everyone the path to follow in order to achieve complete teshuvah, as it is written: “Therefore He guides sinners on the way.”

The same applies to all areas of teshuvah: The fact that we regret our sins allows them to be erased, to disappear, and to be completely annulled. This comes from the goodness of Hashem, Who forgives us and gladly accepts those who sincerely return to Him, especially during this most fitting time, days of mercy and supplication when G-d’s hand is ready to welcome those who repent. We are obligated to take advantage of this precious occasion and draw closer to Him by doing teshuvah and increasing our good deeds. As such, we will merit standing before Him on the day of judgement and to be inscribed for a good life and peace.

The disciples of the Baal Shem Tov said that on Rosh Hashanah, each of us receives a great light in our soul, with numerous sparks of holiness awakening within us. For it was on this day that the first man was created, and G-d breathed into him a pure soul with great and powerful lights. These very same lights awaken each year, and we also merit their illumination in our souls.

I would add that G-d certainly demonstrates tremendous goodness by allowing us to benefit from the great light originating from the first man. Yet in order for this light and its sparks of holiness to remain in us throughout the year, we must prepare our hearts and purify ourselves so as to make our body fitting to receive this light. For that to happen, we must do sincere teshuvah, rectify our deeds, and be committed to distancing ourselves from evil and drawing close to good, which is the holy Torah.

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Everything Depends on the End

The well-known teaching of our Sages that “Everything depends on the end” (Berachot 12a) takes on its full power and significance in the mitzvah of teshuvah. In fact a person who has sinned and acted wickedly throughout his life, yet regrets his deeds just before he leaves this world, will have his repentance accepted and even hoped for by G-d.

The same applies to the end of the year. On the eve of Rosh Hashanah, when we spiritually awaken and examine our deeds, deciding to repent and improve ourselves, we retroactively rectify the entire year. This spiritual awakening at the end of the year will elevate all our deeds from the past year for good and for blessing.

The author of Ketzei Hamateh figuratively interprets the verse, “For had we not [lulei] delayed, by now we could have returned twice” (Bereshith 43:10). He notes that the term lulei (“had we not”) is composed of the same letters as elul, as if to say: Even if we have delayed in repenting and are awaiting the month of Elul, the month of mercy and supplications, “by now” – ata, a term whose initials stand for erev techilat hashanah (“eve of the start of the year”) – “we could have returned twice” – with two-fold repentance.

I Forgive Everything

The Tur in Orach Chaim (581) states that the custom among Ashkenazim is to fast on the eve of Rosh Hashanah. As a source for this custom, he cites the following words from the Midrash (Tanchuma, Parsha Emor):

This is like a province whose inhabitants owed taxes to the king. The king sent emissaries to collect these taxes, but the people did not pay them, and so they owed an enormous amount. This happened not just once, but twice.

What did the king do? He said to his ministers, “We shall pay them a visit.” When they were within ten miles of the province, its inhabitants heard of the king’s arrival. What did they do? Their nobles went out to meet the king.

He asked them, “Who are you?” They replied, “We are the inhabitants of the province to which you sent emissaries to collect taxes.” He told them, “And what do you want?” They replied, “We beg you, have mercy on us, for we have no money to pay these taxes.” He said to them, “For you, I will reduce the amount by a third.”

As the king came within five miles of the province, the middle classes among the people met him. He asked them, “Who are you?” They replied, “We are the inhabitants of the province to which you sent emissaries to collect taxes. We do not have the means to meet this obligation, and we implore you to show us mercy.” He said to them, “I have already reduced the amount by a third, but for you I will reduce it by another third.”

When the king finally reached the province, all the people came out to meet him, both young and old. He said to them, “What do you want?” They replied, “Your Majesty, we cannot pay you what we owe.” He said to them, “I have already reduced the amount by a third, and then I only asked for the remaining third. For you, I will reduce it completely. Yet from now on, we shall begin a new account.”

The king in this story is obviously Hashem. The inhabitants of the province are the Jewish people, who accumulate sins throughout the year. What does G-d ask of them? He says: “Do teshuvah as early as Rosh Hashanah!” However they only fast and repent when they reach Yom Kippur, and G-d forgives them. Nevertheless, on the eve of Rosh Hashanah the great individuals among the generation fast,

and Hashem erases a third of their sins. Then between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, some notable individuals fast, and Hashem erases another third of their sins. Finally on Yom Kippur, all the Jewish people (men, women and children) fast and ask for mercy, and Hashem forgives all their sins.

The Chayei Adam gives another reason for this custom: The eve of Rosh Hashanah is the final day of the year, and by tradition the Sages know that a person who repents for one day in the year is considered to have done teshuvah for the entire year. Hence they instituted that everyone should fast on this day (Chayei Adam 138).

In our time, the custom among Ashkenaz communities that follow the Rema is to fulfill their obligation with a mitzvah meal, such as at a siyum or Brit Milah, as mentioned in the book Peninei Rabbeinu HaKehilot Yaakov.

Rabbi Yochanan Fasted

Another custom is mentioned by the Beit Yosef, who cites the HaGaot Maimoniot in stating:

“Some have the custom of not fasting on the eve of Rosh Hashanah so as not to imitate the nations, who usually fast on their holidays. However in Pesikta DeRav Kahana, we find the mitzvah to fast on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, since it is mentioned in the Yerushalmi: ‘Rabbi Yochanan fasted on the eve of every Rosh Hashanah.’”

This custom of not fasting on the eve of Rosh Hashanah is mentioned by other Acharonim. Here we shall only cite what the Maharal states: “It is a custom throughout the Diaspora for young women to eat before sunrise on Rosh Hashanah.” The book Darchei Moshe adds, “I have seen many scrupulous people who eat a little in order to also follow the advice of the HaGaot Maimoniot, according to whom some avoid fasting in order not to imitate non-Jews, which is why they eat a little before sunrise.”

Yet according to Kabbalah, it is better to abstain from eating before sunrise. Hence the book Sha’arei Teshuvah states that the custom is to drink some tea or coffee.

By the Merit of the Dead

In his book Ben Ish Hai (Parsha Nitzavim), Rabbi Yosef Haim also cites the special customs surrounding the eve of Rosh Hashanah, besides fasting, concerning which he states: “It is good for everyone to respect this custom, besides a very frail man, an old man, or a child.”

In regard to the custom described by the Rema (“people have the custom on the eve of Rosh Hashanah to visit the graves of the dead and utter supplications”), the Rav becomes irate and warns: “We must not pray to the dead. Instead, we must beseech G-d to act with mercy toward us by the merit of the dead.”

Likewise, the custom is to give even more charity to those who study Torah, as well as the needy, according to the verse: “Charity saves from death” (Mishlei 10:2).

Guard Your Tongue

He’s a Talebearer!

The prohibition against rechilut [talebearing] exists even when we have no intention of expressing hatred for someone. Even if we think that the person we are speaking about has acted correctly, if we believe that our words may lead to Shimon hating Yehudah, then such words are prohibited.

Time for Change

It is written, “From the hewer of your wood to the drawer of your water” (Devarim 29:10).

By way of allusion, Rabbi Yehudah Moelem Shlita explains this verse according to a teaching of our Sages on Av 15: This day was a holiday for Israel, for on this day people stopped cutting wood for the altar because the sun was no longer strong enough to dry wood. This meant that it was possible for worms to make their way into the wood, making it unusable for the altar. Rav Menassi adds that from that day on, since the nights become longer in winter, whoever adds to his Torah study is given more time by Heaven, and whoever does not add to his Torah study may die before his time.

Hence the verse is saying: “From the hewer of your wood” – which is Av 15; “to the drawer of your water” – meaning until Hoshanah Rabba, when we draw water for the libations, we are all standing before Hashem. Until that point, a person can still change the decision rendered in his regard by taking upon himself the yoke of Torah and by not losing precious time in useless pursuits, especially during the long winter nights. However if Hoshanah Rabba has already arrived, but a person has still not committed himself to bettering his ways, then he needs a great deal of mercy to improve his verdict. – Devar Yosef

Led Astray

It is written, “You saw their abominations and their detestable idols of wood and stone, of silver and gold that were with them” (Devarim 29:16).

Rabbi Shlomo Tzadok Shlita explains why similar terms are used in this verse, as well as why it is so lengthy, given that the first words tell us everything we need to know (after all, it makes no difference if idols are made of wood and stone, or silver and gold).

The Torah had to mention both silver and gold, wood and stone in order to hint to us that it is absolutely forbidden simply to be impressed by the abundance of silver and gold that covers them, or by their artistic designs.

Why so? Because focusing our thoughts and attention on them is liable to lead us into error. It also hints to us that success symbolised by silver and gold is liable to lead us astray regarding idols.

Why Twice?

It is written, “You will return unto Hashem your G-d and listen to His voice” (Devarim 30:2).

The Sages have said, “If one says, ‘I will sin and repent, sin and repent,’ he will not be given any opportunity to repent” (Yoma 85b). This is surprising, for why did the Sages need to repeat the expression “sin and repent”?

The book Pninei Kedem cites an explanation for this doublet, namely that among the 613 mitzvot is the mitzvah of teshuvah, as we read in this week’s parsha: “You will return unto Hashem your G-d and listen to His voice.” Now it is impossible to fulfill the mitzvah of teshuvah without having previously sinned. Hence a person must have committed a sin in order to fulfill the mitzvah of teshuvah.

To whom does this refer? To someone who says, “I will sin and repent,” meaning that he sinned once in order to fulfill the mitzvah of teshuvah. However if he repeats his transgression and sins again, he is no longer permitted to repent.

Consolations

It is written, “Hashem your G-d will bring back your captivity and have mercy on you” (Devarim 30:3).

The Radbaz was asked why, in the reprimands of Parsha Bechukotai, consolations appear next to the curses, whereas in the reprimands of Parsha Ki-Tavo no consolations appear next to the curses. His explanation was the following:

Given that the Tetragrammaton – which is the Name of divine mercy – appears throughout the passage of the reprimands, consolations are indeed present.

What’s more is that in Parsha Nitzavim, which immediately follows Parsha Ki-Tavo, it is written: “Hashem your G-d will bring back your captivity and have mercy on you,” meaning that consolations appear immediately after the reprimands.

In the Light of the Parsha

The Essence of Teshuvah: Sins Committed in Secret

It is written, “The hidden things are for Hashem our G-d, and the revealed things are for us and our children forever, to carry out all the words of this Torah” (Devarim 29:28).

The Sages have said that the first letters of the Hebrew expression Elokeinu vehaniglot lanu u’levaneinu (“our G-d, and the revealed things are for us and our children”) form the word elul. This means that the essence of teshuvah pertains to sins that are committed in secret, for we usually repent of sins that are committed openly, since we know that others are aware of them. However we do not feel the need to repent of sins that are committed in secret, which is why the Torah warns us by saying: “The hidden things are for Hashem our G-d, and the revealed things are for us and our children forever.” In other words, just as every person repents of sins he commits in public and before his children, he must also deeply repent of sins that he alone is aware of.

Hence this week’s parsha begins by stating, “You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem your G-d: The leaders of your tribes, your elders, and your officers, all the men of Israel” (Devarim 29:9). The Sages have explained that “today” signifies Rosh Hashanah (see Zohar III:231a). As for the expression, “The leaders of your tribes,” the Sages have also said: “Although I have appointed leaders, elders, and officers for you, you are all equal before Me, as it is written: ‘all the men of Israel’” (Tanchuma, Nitzavim 2). What is the reason for this? It is to teach us that when Jews repent, they are all equal before Hashem – from the hewers of wood to the tribal leaders. It is therefore said, “You are standing today, all of you” – i.e., when are you standing before Hashem without shame? On Rosh Hashanah, when you have all repented.

I would add this teaching from the Sages: “If a person commits a transgression in secret, the Holy One, blessed be He, proclaims it against him in public” (Sotah 3a). People are used to watching things at home alone. They go out, rent movies, and watch them in private, movies about completely fictitious events, such as thieves killing people or terrorists hijacking a plane and killing everyone aboard. They will watch all this, and they will actually enjoy it.

What was the result? A vile terrorist who spent his entire life perpetrating acts of terror sent 20 other terrorists to hijack four planes, flying two of them into the Twin Towers in New York and killing thousands of people. Thus the verse was fulfilled, “I will send a fire against Magog and against those who dwell confidently in the islands, and they will know that I am Hashem” (Ezekiel 39:6). Because they took pleasure in foolish stories and movies in private, the Holy One, blessed be He, proclaimed it against them in public, and what they watched actually took place. This happened to show the inhabitants of the world that they shouldn’t enjoy watching such things. Whoever saw it was filled with dread. May it be G-d’s will that we achieve complete repentance. Amen.

Forgiveness that Led to Children

Among the disciples of the Maggid of Koznitz was Reb Yosef, who to his great disappointment remained childless. Every month he would go see his Rav and implore him for a blessing to have children. However the Maggid seemed to pay no attention to these requests, or he would brush them aside with some obscure remark.

However the wife of Reb Yosef did not lose hope. She constantly pressured her husband into obtaining a blessing from his Rav, and not to give up until he received it. Thus one day, Reb Yosef stood before his Rav and said: "My holy teacher, I won't move from here until I receive your blessing!"

The Maggid of Koznitz began to think, and a very serious look appeared on his face. He finally said, "If you agree to give up all your money, I will give you a blessing to have children."

The disciple stood there, frozen in place, unable to speak. He felt that he couldn't make such a decision on his own, and so he returned home and consulted his wife, who immediately agreed to the Maggid's condition. He therefore returned to his teacher and told him that he and his wife were both ready for a life of poverty in exchange for children. "In that case, go see the Chozeh of Lublin and do everything he tells you," the Maggid of Koznitz concluded.

Reb Yosef obeyed his Rav, traveled to Lublin, and explained the reason for his visit to the Chozeh, as well as who had sent him. "Remain here with me until Hashem clarifies things for me," the Chozeh said to him.

One day the Chozeh summoned him and said, "When you were much younger, you were engaged to a young woman from your town, but you later broke off the engagement and brought shame upon her. You never bothered to console her, which is why you cannot have children. Until she forgives you, you will not have any children! Therefore go to the fair at Balta, where you will find your former fiancée, and ask her for forgiveness."

Reb Yosef was stunned. Indeed, in his youth his parents had introduced him to Esther Shifra, a young woman from a good family. However when he grew older and reached the age of marriage, he agreed to another shidduch. He never bothered, either before his wedding or after, to ask the young woman to forgive him for what he had done.

Reb Yosef therefore left for Balta, asking everyone along the way if they knew a woman by the name of Esther Shifra from such-and-such a town. He also tried to obtain information about her at the fair, but all his efforts proved useless.

Three days before the end of the fair, as all the merchants were preparing to head back home, Reb Yosef was walking along the streets of the city, troubled and completely lost. All of a sudden a heavy rain began to fall. He sought shelter in one of the nearby shops, and among the people crowding around him was a young woman. Out of modesty, he moved away from her. When the woman saw him, she got upset and shouted in front of everyone: "Look at this man! He abandoned me when I was young, and even today he doesn't want to be near me!"

When Reb Yosef heard these words, he looked at the woman and immediately recognized his former fiancée. He then begged her to forgive him, explaining that he had traveled specifically to Balta in order to ask her for forgiveness. As he spoke, he burst into tears, which proved his sincerity and honesty.

"I am ready to forgive you," said the woman, "but on one condition only." Reb Yosef nodded his head in agreement. "If I can do it, then I'll agree to any condition you set," he said to her.

"Very well," said the woman. "Go to Soblak, where my brother lives. He's very poor and in need of many things. If you give him 200 florins for his daughter's dowry, I will forgive you for all the pain you caused me in the past."

Reb Yosef began to think, and he realized that if he sold all his possessions and added whatever cash he had, he could come up with 200 florins. He therefore agreed to her condition, returned home, and then collected the required amount and left for Soblak to look for the woman's brother.

He eventually found him at his home, wretched and depressed. "The day of my daughter's wedding is approaching, and I don't have a cent," he told Reb Yosef.

Reb Yosef said to him, "Here are 200 florins in hard cash so you can celebrate a wedding like a dignitary!" He then handed him a large sack of money. When the man opened it, he looked at the florins and then back at Reb Yosef, but couldn't believe it. "Who are you, and what is the meaning of this gift?" He was stunned.

"You have nothing to worry about," Reb Yosef assured him. "The money comes from a kosher source and is completely legitimate. I was told by your sister, Esther Shifra, to give it to you. I was engaged to your sister when I was young, but I broke off the engagement to marry another woman. A few days ago, I met her and asked her for forgiveness, and she told me to give you 200 florins if I wanted her forgiveness."

The brother's facial expression changed to one of complete shock. He looked at Reb Yosef as if he were insane. "Have you come here to make fun of me? It's already been 15 years that my sister passed away! She died here in Soblak when she was young, and I buried her myself!"

Reb Yosef's entire body began to shake. After he managed to calm down a little, he told the brother everything that had happened to him, beginning with the Maggid of Koznitz and then with the Chozeh of Lublin. Finally, he described the woman he met in Balta. All that remained was for the man to confirm that it was his sister, Esther Shifra, her and no one else!

Less than a year later, Reb Yosef and his wife had a child. In the years that followed, they had other children and grandchildren, all of whom walked in the ways of Torah.

