

Making the Most of Elul **Rabbi Maury Grebenau**

It must be Elul. It happens every year. Just a little before Rosh HaShanah someone asks me the question I dread. “Rabbi, are you ready for Rosh HaShanah?” The reason I don’t like the question is that I never feel ready for Rosh HaShanah, aside from being ready for a few days off. Intellectually I know that Elul is supposed to be a month of preparation to help feel more ready, but I have trouble making this a reality. How should we prepare? What can we do to help make that question a little less likely to make our stomachs queasy?

Lo Bashamayim Hi

As usual, the Torah reading which falls during this time gives us some clues. Just before Rosh Hashana we always read the parsha of *Nitzavim* which contains the section of *Lo Bashamayim hi* (it is not in Heaven). The Ramban (Devarim 30:11) says that we are speaking about the Mitzva of teshuva and we are told that it is not in Heaven, rather it is close to us and we are expected to do it. There are two interesting questions about this section of the Torah which can give us a deeper insight into the Torah’s message. Firstly, this is an unusual construct. The Torah takes pains to tell us a mistaken thought which is not correct, that the mitzvah of Teshuva might be in Heaven. It is not often that the Torah spends space to tell us about a mistaken thought we might have. There are plenty of negative commandments about what we should not do, say and even think but this is inherently valuable since it is instructive. What is instructive about this? Couldn’t we just be told that the Mitzva of teshuva is close to us? What does the inclusion of where the mitzvah of teshuva is not to be found add?

The second question is that even if we understand why the Torah mentions this mistaken thought we’d need to understand how the thought could be so off base. In the Gemara we call such a mistaken initial thought a *Hava Aminah* and we try to understand what the initial concept was and what has been corrected in the final understanding. Here we are hard pressed to understand the initial thought, how is it that something which is so close to us could be thought of as so far away?

I heard a beautiful approach to the second question which I think can also shed light on the first question as well. The Torah here is outlining two very different easy to approach the idea of teshuva. We could consider the teshuva process to be similar to that of asking a person for forgiveness or we could take a different approach. I once witnessed a student in middle school who had just learned the idea that after a person asks for forgiveness three times then they have done their part even if they have not been forgiven¹. She approached another girl in her class

¹ See Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 606:1). This halacha has details which are important but are not included here

who she had apparently wronged in some way. She asked for forgiveness since Yom Kippur was approaching and the other girl refused. She took a deep breath and said “I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I’m sorry! Now it is your aveirah (sin)!”.

While this is a rather extreme incident borne of the complex social dynamics of middle school, I think it brings to light a reality that when we ask for forgiveness much is out of our hands. We can do our part but the critical part really rests with the other person and this brings with it a feeling of powerlessness but also a lightening of our own obligation. We asked, what else can we do? We might be tempted to think that teshuva is the same light. Teshuva is in Heaven and Hashem will either grant me forgiveness or not. There is only so much I can do; I’ve asked now it is very distant from me.

It is for this reason that we are told by the Torah to flip our perspective. Teshuva is not like asking Hashem for forgiveness, this is a mistake. Rather we are told that teshuva is about us! We are told that the matter is close to us; it is in your mouth and heart to do it. The Ramban explains that this is a reference to two critical aspects of teshuva: *viduy* (admitting our sin in specific terms), the mouth and *charatah* (regretting our sins), the heart. It is this perspective shift which produces such a disparity between the initial thought and the final understanding. It also explains why the Torah takes pains to disabuse us of this idea. It is critical to understand this idea if we are to do teshuva properly.

Dveikus

The idea of teshuva is becoming closer to Hashem by reevaluating our actions. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan explains that in the spiritual world “closeness” is not a matter of proximity but of similarity. When two things are more similar they are spiritually closer and when they are unlike they are farther away in a spiritual sense². The mitzvah of teshuva is to do a spiritual inventory with the goals of coming closer to Hashem by making ourselves a little more similar to our Creator.

Rav Yeshayah Horowitz, the Shla”h haKadosh, explains that the two mitzvot featured in the next parsha, Vayeilech show how special we are and this is connected with the idea of teshuva. We have the mitzvah of hakhel which demonstrates our uniqueness on a national level with the entire people hearing the Torah read by the king every seven years. We also have the mitzvah of writing our own sefer Torah which underscores the specialness of every individual Jew. Rav Horowitz references the concept that all other nations have an angel which is their intermediary with Hashem while we have no such angel. We connect directly with Hashem.

² He uses this to explain the idea that every angel can have only one job. If there are two jobs then by definition there are two disparate things and thus two angels. Similarly if two angels had one job then they would **be** one angel!

The Navi tells us that “*Ani Hashem lo shanisi*” – “I am G-d, I do not change.” So Hashem is there for us to connect it is our job to make ourselves more similar. The question of clinging to Hashem, or *dveikus*, is one of alignment. When two lines are perfectly aligned they are said to be parallel and regardless of the distance we travel they will always be the same distance from each other. However, if there is an angle of departure, even a miniscule one, it will have a major impact down the road. The farther we travel the more distance we will find between these two lines. Similarly, the work of *teshuva* is for us to align ourselves with Hashem to make sure that we will remain close to Hashem as we travel down the road of life.

This is what it means that *teshuva* isn't in Heaven with Hashem, it is with us to use the *viduy* as a way to check our alignment. We must find the areas in which we are not aligned with Hashem and find the small ways in which we can shift ourselves. The same way that the alignment is critical in the negative sense is also true in the positive sense. If we can find a way to shift it ever so slightly our orientation we can have significant impact down the road. If we can shift just a tiny bit in our orientation during this time we can find ourselves much closer to Hashem as the year progresses.

Prayer & Action

During Elul we recite *l'dovid Hashem Ori* twice a day. In it Dovid HaMelech speaks about a request he would make of Hashem. Two words are used for the requests ‘*sheilah*’ and ‘*bakasha*’. Rav Yisachar Shlomo Teichtal in his sefer, *Eim haBonim Smeicha*, quotes an idea from a Chassidic source³. *Sheilah* is a pure verbal request and *Bakasha* is an action which shows what we want. Through our actions we also show that we are making requests of Hashem and that we truly mean them.

The Gemara (Niddah 70b-71a) tells us that if one desires to be wise they need to take action and also pray and that doing just one is not sufficient. This is the central message of having a full month to prepare for the days of awe. We must certainly daven and be uplifted by the shul experience of these days, but there is action which we must take as well. *Teshuva* is not in Heaven, it is in our hands. This is the *Bakasha* which we must bring with us to the days of awe. The work we must do to align ourselves with Hashem to make sure we can make the incremental changes which will put us on the best path for this year.

³ Rav Teichtal wrote his sefer on the run from the Nazis during WWII and he did not have any seforim with him. Despite this he quotes many sources verbatim at length from memory. However, in this case he says that he does not recall the exact source of this idea.