

Teshuva and Self-Esteem

Many communities have a custom to sing aloud the communal recitation of *Vidui* (the verbal acknowledgement of our mistakes) in an upbeat melody that seems almost joyous. This experience — for many Ashkenazim during the recitation of *Ashamnu* and for Sephardim during the recitation of *Chatanu Lefanecha* — seems glaringly dissonant. How can we sing happily while we admit our guilt for misdeeds?¹

This incongruity hints at a deeper question regarding the overall experience of teshuva — the process of returning to our spiritual selves. The Rambam notes that *Vidui* is central to this journey:

כשיעשה תשובה וישוב מחטאו חייב להתודות לפני הא-ל ברוך הוא.

When one engages in repentance and returns from one's sin, one must perform a confessional before the Almighty.

Rambam, Hilchot Teshuva 1:1

We are obligated to verbally admit our guilt. Rav Hamnuna articulated this in one general declaration:

רבא בתר צלותיה אמר הכי א-להי עד שלא נוצרתי איני כדאי ועכשיו שנוצרתי כאלו לא נוצרתי עפר אני בחיי ק"ו במיתתי יהי אני לפניך ככלי מלא בושא וכלימה יהי רצון מלפניך ה' אלהי שלא אחטא עוד ומה שחטאתי לפניך מרק ברחמיך הרבים אבל לא ע"י יסורין וחלאים רעים והיינו וידוי דרב המנוגא זוטי ביומא דכפורי.

Rava would recite the following after his prayers: "My God, until I was created, I was not worthy and now that I was created, it is as if I wasn't created. I am



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considered dust during my lifetime and certainly after I have passed. In Your Presence, I am like a utensil full of shame and embarrassment. May it be Your will, Hashem, my God, that I will never sin again, and the sins that I have committed before You, wipe away with Your great mercy, but not through suffering and terrible diseases." This is the confessional of Rav Hamnuna Zuti on Yom Kippur.

Berachot 17a

Any serious contemplation of this statement, which we repeat annually as part of our Yom Kippur liturgy, creates feelings of sadness, shame and disappointment. When we consider the number and scope of our misdeeds, we can become overwhelmed and depressed; the multitude of shortcomings we repeat from year to year can leave us despondent.

With all of this heavy emotional baggage of teshuva, how could Chazal describe Yom Kippur as one of the two most joyous days of the year (Mishna, *Taanit* 26b)? How can we approach the Yamim Noraim without "*atzvut v'atzvanut*" (sadness and consternation) in the words of Rav Shlomo Wolbe zt"l (*Alei Shur* vol. 1 p. 47)? How could it be that in Talmudic times, young single people would dance in the vineyards (Gemara, *Taanis* 31a) on such a

somber day of teshuva?

The answer to these questions is that, contrary to what it seems, the process of teshuva actually gives us several reasons to celebrate.

The first reason is that, as the Rambam's passage explains, our *Vidui* takes place "Before the Almighty." We stand before Hashem during the process of teshuva. This, in and of itself — the experience of being in Hashem's presence — is reason alone for joy and celebration.

A second reason to celebrate is that through teshuva we cleanse ourselves from the stains of our misdeeds. Like the refreshing feeling of a long overdue shower, our *neshamot* are delighted to be refreshed through teshuva. The Gemara explains:

יום הכפורים משום דאית ביה סליחה ומחילה.
Yom Kippur [is a joyous day] because there is forgiveness and exoneration.

Taanit 30b

Additionally, on a more global level, we are happy to rid Hashem's world from the barriers that separate Him from us and the spiritual pollution that we have generated. The Baal Shem Tov likens this to the joy of the palace janitor who takes great pride and pleasure in removing the dust from the royal residence.²

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Yet there is another reason for joy in teshuva, which addresses a fundamental aspect of our lives: self-esteem.

Self-esteem is a crucial component of our spiritual lives. Reb Tzadok Hakohen of Lublin explains:

כשם שאדם צריך להאמין בה' יתברך כך צריך אחר כך להאמין בעצמו.

Just as a person must have faith in Hashem, so too, afterwards, a person must have faith in oneself.

Tzidkat Hatzadik no. 154

The Talmud (*Makkot* 24a) teaches, based on the words of the prophet Chavakuk (2:4) — *v'tzadik be'emunato yichyeh*, the righteous one will live through his faith, that *emunah* in Hashem is the cornerstone of Judaism. According to Reb Tzadok, the concept of believing in ourselves is just as important. This is because self-esteem may be the most basic ingredient in the development of a healthy life of *avodat Hashem*. Without healthy self-esteem, we are subject to debilitating emotional challenges that inhibit our growth. The prominent psychiatrist Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski has noted:

I have been accused of having a one-track mind, and I plead guilty as charged. I have indeed said that with the exception of those psychiatric disorders that are of physiologic causation, e.g., bipolar disorder, all psychological disorders are due, at least in part, and sometimes entirely, to low self-esteem.

Letters to My Children, pg. 16

The question is what does self-esteem mean? Does it ignore our past actions and current reality? The answer is found in the definition of self-esteem, as outlined by Dr. Nethanial Branden, a leading expert on the subject:

Self-esteem is the experience of being competent to cope with the basic

challenges of life and of being worthy of happiness. It consists of two components:

- 1) *self-efficacy, or confidence in our ability to think, learn, choose, and make appropriate decisions; and*
- 2) *self-respect, or confidence in our right to be happy; and in the belief that achievement, success, friendship, respect, love and fulfillment are appropriate to us.*

The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem

In light of this understanding, we learn what self-esteem is not. Self-esteem does not mean that one considers himself or herself to be great. Rather, it means that every person believes in their potential and worthiness. With this in mind, we can understand how teshuva reinforces rather than impedes self-esteem in various ways.

On a basic level, self-esteem is about accurate self-knowledge, which is the purpose of *Vidui*. The Hebrew word *vidui* is etymologically related to the word *vadai*, which means certitude. In our Yom Kippur teshuva we affirm our mistakes, but this is not the whole story. The word *vidui* in the context of teshuva reminds us of the same word used in the context of accomplishment — *vidui maaser*.³ This term is used by Chazal to describe one's proper accounting upon the completion of correctly tithing produce. Hence, when we introspect and enumerate our mistakes, we grow in our self-awareness as part of our overall understanding of our achievements as well.

Teshuva also addresses self-esteem's emphasis on potential, which we can illustrate with a parable. Imagine two patients lying near each other in a hospital ward. The first is being cut, poked and prodded by a phalanx of doctors and nurses, while the second is lying quietly, unattended. An onlooker, unfamiliar with hospital

routine, might pity the first patient, who is "suffering" at the hands of the doctors, and feel happy for the patient who is resting quietly. But the truth is that the first patient is the beneficiary of medical attention because the staff has hope for his recovery, while the second patient is receiving only palliation because all hope is lost.

The regimen of teshuva that the halacha outlines for us is a symbol of our potential — our hope for the future. Like medical intervention, it often hurts. We do and should feel pain under the scrutiny of personal introspection that the Yamim Noraim require. However, instead of these feelings pushing us into a downward spiral of despair, the opportunity to address our past errors should reinforce the notion that Hashem believes in us. Teshuva is predicated on the idea that we always have the possibility to change. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik explains that this is a fundamental idea:

Repentance is grounded in two principles. 1. On the power within man to accuse himself, and his ability to see himself as unworthy and inferior. In the confessional declaration on Yom Kippur "But Thou art righteous in all that is come upon us; for Thou has acted truthfully, but we have wrought unrighteousness," the wonderful power of total, unreserved self-accusation is expressed. 2. On the great ability of each individual to cleanse himself, to grasp that the boundless spiritual forces hidden away within the human personality (including that of even the greatest sinner) drive one towards return to God. On the ability of man to raise himself to the greatest heights, if he but wishes it, though he has sunk to the abysmal depths of impurity. The second principle is just as important

as the first. A person is unable to repent if he lacks the courage to blame and to condemn himself. Regret is impossible without recognition of sin. On the other hand, one cannot imagine recognition of sin and commitment for the future unless man believes in his creative faculties and ability, and in the powers of his soul that help him to sanctify himself.

The Rav Speaks, p. 133⁴

The entire premise of teshuva is that Hashem believes in our worthiness and in our ability to improve. The introduction to the *Vidui* of Neilah reminds us that:

אתה נותן יד לפושעים. וימינה פשוטה לקבל שבים.

You give a hand to sinners. Your right hand is extended to receive repenters.

The connection between teshuva and self-esteem also manifests itself in an attitude of confidence: that we are able to do teshuva. Our tradition emphasizes that the possibility and ability of teshuva exists for everyone. No matter how far one may have strayed, every person must remember that he has the ability to return. In this light, we can appreciate the Rambam's view that the Torah is referring to teshuva when it speaks of "a matter that is close to us":

כי קרוב אליך הדבר מאד בפיה ובלבך לעשתו.

This matter is close to you. It is in your mouth and your heart to do it.

Devarim 30:14

The Torah wants to reinforce our self-confidence; we should not be overwhelmed by our past mistakes and think that teshuva is beyond our reach. It is not.

This confidence is reinforced by a teaching of Rebbi Nachman of Breslav:

לענין התחזקות לבל יפל האדם בדעתו מחמת רבוי הפגמים והקלולים שקלקל על ידי מעשיו ענה ואמר: אם אתה מאמין שיכולין לקלקל תאמין שיכולין לתקן.

Regarding words of encouragement — in order that a person doesn't become discouraged from the multitude of harmful and destructive acts brought about by one's actions — [Rebbi Nachman] said: if you believe that you can destroy, believe that you can repair. **Likutei Moharan Tinyana no. 112**

We must believe in ourselves and have confidence in our teshuva. Rav Kook stresses this often in his major work, *Orot HaTeshuva*.⁵

Finally, there is one more profound aspect of self-esteem in our teshuva. The last of the Rambam's four steps of teshuva is commitment not to repeat our mistakes in the future (Rambam, *Hilchot Teshuva* 2:2). Having high self-esteem is crucial for this all-important ability to move forward. A person who doesn't believe in their ability and significance may not have the motivation to make the right choices. However, one who does believe in himself has a reason to live up to noble expectations. Rav Shlomo Wolbe articulates this point with a powerful statement (*Alei Shur*, vol. 1 p.168):

כל אדם חייב לדעת, שיש לו חשיבות, לא חשיבות מדומה שהוא "מחשיב עצמו בעצמו", כפי שהמסילת ישרים מגדיר את הגאווה (בפרק יא), אלא חשיבות בעלת-משמעות עמוקה ואף מוזעזעת. "כל אחד ואחד חייב לומר: בשבילי נברא העולם" — רש"י: "כלומר: חשוב אני כעולם מלא, לא אטרד את עצמי מן העולם בעבירה אחת." (סנהדרין לז, א)

Every person must know that he has importance. Not imaginary importance where one "values oneself through one's own evaluation," a phrase used by Mesillat Yesharim to describe haughtiness. Rather, importance with

deep and trembling ramifications. [The Gemara, Sanhedrin 37a, states] "Each person must say: the world was created for me." Rashi [explains] Meaning that I am as important as a whole world. I won't ruin my place in the world with a single transgression.

A person with healthy self-esteem will distance himself from spiritual pitfalls because he will see them as beneath him.

With these insights we appreciate the important relationship between teshuva and self-esteem. We can understand why, despite the inner sadness engendered by confronting our mistakes through teshuva, this process of spiritual renewal is the source of so much joy and meaning in our lives. It is what builds our true character and helps us grow. Who could ever imagine a happier day than one on which a person finds their self-esteem in the presence of the Almighty? Surely this is cause for a joyous melody.

Endnotes

1 Dr. Miriam Sova recalls how Rabbi Shimon Schwab instructed his community at one point to adjust the cadence of the *Vidui* nusach because it sounded too celebratory.

2 Perhaps this is why the world was able to receive the second Luchot on Yom Kippur.

3 This connection is developed by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik in *The Rav Speaks*, pp. 133-134.

4 Perhaps this is why the Rambam interrupts the *Laws of Teshuva* with a discussion of the doctrine of free will; it is precisely our ability to choose that enables us to transform through teshuva; see *Hilchot Teshuva* ch 7.

5 See *Orot HaTeshuva*, chapter 14, for example. For an extensive discussion of this concept of confidence in teshuva and overcoming the despair of past errors, see *Ashiv Mimetzulos* by Rav Yehoshua Shapira.