

Le-Dovid and Teshuva: Achieving Clarity of Purpose, By Rabbi Michael Rosensweig

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The practice of *Klal Yisrael* is to recite Psalm 27, *le-David Hashem ori ve-yishi*, throughout the month of *Elul*. Ostensibly, this practice is motivated by the Midrash on the opening verse of the psalm:

Rabinin Patri Kra be-Rosh Ha-Shana u-beYom ha-Kippurim. Ori be-Rosh Ha-Shana, she-hu Yom ha-Din, she-Ne'emar ve-Hotzi ke-Or Tzidkecha u-Mishpatekha ke-Tzaharayim. ve-Yeshi be-Yom ha-Kippurim, Sheyoshi'ainu ve-Yimchol Lanu Al Kol Avonoteinu.

The rabbis interpreted this verse as referring to Rosh Ha-Shana and Yom Kippur. “*Ori*,” “my light,” on Rosh Ha-Shana, as it is the Day of Judgement, and another verse states, “He shall put forth your justice as the light, your judgment as the noonday.” “*Ve-yishi*,” “and my salvation,” on Yom Kippur, when He shall save us and forgive all our sins.

It seems, however, that what underlies the psalm’s recitation during Elul runs deeper than these few words. The psalm’s theme is highlighted by two crucial verses:

Im Tachaneh Alay Machaneh Lo Yirah Libi Im Takum Alay Milchamah be-Zot Ani Bote’ach. Achat Sha’alti me-Eit Hashem Otah Avakesh Shivti be-Veit Hashem Kol Yimei Chayai Lachazot be-Noam Hashem u-Livaker be-heikhalo.

If a camp encamps against me, I shall not fear; if a war arises against me, in this I shall trust: one

I have asked of G-d, it I shall request, [to] sit in the house of G-d all the days of my life, to gaze upon G-d’s pleasure, and to visit his temple. (v. 3-4)

These verses seem disjointed. The first of these verses appears to introduce a promise from the Ribbono Shel Olam, the memory of which soothes us and builds our confidence when we are distressed and besieged. Yet, at first glance, the following verse describes no such panacea. Instead, it describes a seemingly unrelated lofty ideal.

Rashi and Radak are thus motivated to find the antecedent of *be-zot ani votei’ah*, “in this I shall trust,” earlier in the psalm. Yet Ibn Ezra quotes a position which sees the antecedent of *be-zot ani votei’ah* in the request of the following verse. This position, unlike that of Rashi and Radak, allows the verses to be read as one thought, with a colon between the verses.

To understand how the request forms a basis for confidence and security, we can analyze the uniqueness of the request of *shivti be-veit Hashem*, “to sit in the house of G-d.” Malbim focuses on the striking phrase *otah avakesh*, “it I shall request.” A normal request, explains Malbim, consists of two separate components: the *bakasha*, “request,” which describes the goal of the petitioner, and the *she’eila*, “question,” which details the strategy the petitioner hopes to adopt together with the other party. In this case, uniquely, the question is the request; “to sit in the house of G-d all the days of my life” is simultaneously method and objective.

The unity of *she’eila* and *bakasha* expresses itself in a chronological sense as well. Malbim notes that the verse begins in the past tense but transitions to the future tense. He explains that unlike situational requests, which are relevant only as long as a certain situation lasts, the request “to sit in the house of G-d” is uniquely timeless and thus ties together past and future.^[ii]

The timeless clarity of purpose afforded by the unity of *she'eila* and *bakasha*, of means and end, is precisely the panacea which provides confidence and security to the person in crisis. Tactics can, and often must, deliver reprieve in a particular situation. But a clear objective offers a broader sense of perspective, brings long-term confidence, and provides a greater sense of equanimity. One whose timeless goal is *shivti be-veit Hashem*, “to sit in the house of G-d,” understands the value and purpose in his or her life. Such a perspective allows one to weather any crisis.

This clarity of perspective is central to the concept of Teshuva. It is expressed in one of the tenets of Teshuva:

“ha-Omer Echhte ve-Ashuv Echte ve-Ashuv Ein Maspikin be-Yado la-Asot Teshuva”

One who says, “I shall sin and then repent, I shall sin and then repent” is not provided the opportunity of Teshuva. (Mishnah Yoma 8:9)

Me’iri (*Hibbur Ha-Teshuva*, *Meishiv Nefesh* 1:3) notes how counterintuitive this rule is in practice. One whose sin is wholly rebellious, without any repentant intention, can later repent, but one whose failure is only temporary from the start cannot! In his explanation of how this can be, Me’iri focuses on the cynicism and the built-in exploitation of Teshuva as preventing its efficacy.

One cannot exploit Teshuva because one accomplishes Teshuva by attaining a clarity of perspective, by unifying *she'eila* and *bakasha*. If one instead plans to use Teshuva to overcome an imminent hurdle to securing a positive divine verdict, but wants to allow himself or herself to lapse, one has lost the unity of means and end, and has turned Teshuva into a tactic instead of perspective. “I shall sin and then repent” is inconsistent with the notion of Teshuva as clear perspective, and its inefficacy is a result of that inconsistency, not merely a punishment for abusing the Teshuva process.

During the month of Elul, when we focus our thoughts toward Teshuva, we recite the psalm centered around the timeless, unambiguous ideal at the center of Teshuva, “to sit in the house of G-d.” The clarity of purpose expressed by the unity of *she'eila* and *bakasha* becomes the centerpiece of our Elul enterprise, the single factor “in which we shall trust.”

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[i] This article is an adaption of a *sikha* given by R. Rosensweig during Elul, 5765. The article was reviewed by R. Rosensweig and is part of a future volume of essays edited by Itamar Rosensweig and Avraham Wein.

[ii] Expressing a similar idea, Rashi quotes one opinion which interprets the word *u-levakeir* “to visit,” as related to the word *boker*, “morning.” According to this interpretation, the speaker expresses a desire to visit G-d every morning and thus develop a persistent, long-term relationship.

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