



RETURNING TO HASHEM

Over the course of Yom Kippur, beginning with the Vidui of mincha on Erev Yom Kippur through the conclusion of Neilah, we address our sins many times. Each of the forty-four lines of Al Chet and the specifics of Ashamnu identify a detailed mistake that we verbalize and correct as part of our teshuva process. Yet we should be careful that this important, painstaking effort to redress each error should not occlude an arguably more important element: the return to our connection with Hashem

Himself. Let us frame this issue in light of two questions.

First, the Rambam famously presents a panoramic sweep of the particulars and principles of teshuva in ten chapters in the *Book of Madda*. Significantly, he does so in a peculiar manner. As expected, he begins the first chapter with the requirement for teshuva/vidui (the relationship between these specific concepts is a source of much discussion). However, he repeats the description of teshuva in the seventh chapter, this time with

a unique exhortation that a person should strive to do teshuva, plus an added magisterial description:

כמה מעולה מעלת התשובה. אמש היה זה מובדל מה' אלקי ישראל שנאמר עונותיכם היו מבדילים ביניכם לבין אלקיכם. צועק ואינו נענה שנאמר כי תרבו תפלה וגו' ועושה מצות וטורפין אותן בפניו שנאמר מי בקש זאת מידכם רמוס חצרי, מי גם בכס ויסגר דלתים וגו'. והיום הוא מודבק בשכינה שנאמר ואתם הדבקים בה' אלקיכם. צועק ונענה מיד שנאמר והיה טרם יקראו ואני אענה. ועושה מצות ומקבלין אותן בנחת ושמחה שנאמר כי כבר רצה האלקים את מעשיך. ולא עוד אלא

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שמתאווים להם שנאמר וערבה לה' מנחה:
 יהודה וירושלם כימי עולם וכשנים קדמוניות:
*How superior is the degree of repentance!
 But yesterday was this sinner separated
 from the Lord God of Israel, as it is said:
 "But your iniquities have separated
 between you and your God" (Is. 59.2);
 cries, but received no answer, as it is
 said: "Yea, when ye make many prayers,
 I will not hear" (Ibid. 1.15); does obey
 commandments, but they are thrown
 back in his face, as it is said: "Who
 hath required this at your hand, to
 trample My courts?" (Ibid.-12), and,
 "Oh that there were even among you
 that would shut the doors, that ye might
 not kindle fire on Mine altar in vain!"
 (Mal. 1.10). But today he is connected
 with the Shekinah, as it is said: "But
 ye that did cleave unto the Lord your
 God are alive every one of you this day"
 (Deut. 4.4); he cries and receives answer
 momentarily, even as it is said: "And it
 shall come to pass that before they call,
 I will answer" (Is. 65.24); he observes
 commandments, and they are received
 with pleasure and joy, even as it is said:
 "For God hath already accepted thy
 works" (Ecc. 9.7); moreover, his works
 are pleurably anticipated, as it is said:
 "Then shall the offering of Judah and
 Jerusalem be pleasant unto the Lord,
 as in the days of old, and as in ancient
 years" (Mal. 3.4).*

Why does the Rambam wait until the seventh chapter to deliver this fundamental message about the nature of the mitzvah? Why in this chapter is



teshuva something to which we aspire "yishtadel" in his language — rather than a mitzvah to accomplish?

Let us consider a second difficulty.

The book of Hoshea presents a litany of complaints and biting criticisms of the Jewish people. It concludes on a conciliatory note, encouraging the Jewish people to return to Hashem. These words begin the Haftara that we read on Shabbat Shuva (hence its name):

שׁוּבָה יִשְׂרָאֵל עַד ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ כִּי כָשַׁלְתָּ בְּעֵוֹןךָ.
*Return, O Israel, to the LORD your
 God, for you have fallen because of your
 sin.*

Hoshea 14:2

קָחוּ עִמָּכֶם דְּבָרִים וְשׁוּבוּ אֵלַי ה' אָמְרוּ אֲלֵינוּ כָּל
 תְּשׁוּבָה עִוֹן וְנִקְחָ טוֹב וְנִשְׁלָמָה פְּרִים שׁוֹפְתֵינוּ
*Take words with you and return to the
 LORD. Say to Him: "Forgive all guilt
 and accept what is good; Instead of bulls
 we will pay [The offering of] our lips.*

Hoshea 14:3

The immediate question is, why does the Navi repeat the call to teshuva in back-to-back Pesukim? What is added in the second verse? Furthermore, why does the Hebrew preposition for the word "to" change from *ad* (until) to *el* (to)?

We can appreciate a fundamental distinction within both the words of the Rambam and of Hoshea in light of an incredible and iconic moment in Jewish history. It was the evening



Rabbi Yekusiel Yehuda Halberstam zt"l, the Sanz-Klausenberger Rebbe

of Kol Nidrei 1945 in the Fohrenwald DP camp. Rabbi Yekusiel Yehuda Halberstam zt"l (1905-1994), the Sanz-Klausenberger Rebbe who lost his wife and eleven children to the Nazi Holocaust, stood before the open ark and addressed a gathering of his fellow survivors:

In a wholly unorthodox manner he called out the words of Vidui: "ashamnu, bagadnu (we have sinned, we have rebelled)..." Each word was inflected not as a statement but as a question: "Did we sin? Did we rebel?"

Almost accusatorily, the Rebbe asked, "did we really sin? Did we really rebel? Did we, Chas veshalom, rebel against You and fail to remain faithful? Gazalnu — did we steal? From whom did we steal in Auschwitz and Muldorf? Why is there anybody to steal from?"... Dibarnu dofi — we spoke slander? We never even had enough strength for idle conversation. If by chance we had any remaining strength, we saved it so that

we would be able to answer the questions of our vicious oppressors! He'veinu — we caused perversion? Hirshanu — we caused wickedness? Who? Us? Latznu — we scorned? Who could do such a thing there? Maradnu — we rebelled? Against whom? We rebelled against the Almighty? Didn't we suffer every beating quietly with the knowledge that 'You are righteous in everything that comes upon us'?! We rebelled against our oppressors? Could we have rebelled against them even if we had tried?"

Word by word, the Rebbe dismissed each and every alleged sin of the survivors. "We did not commit evil acts. We did not sin willfully! This Vidui was not written for us," he concluded, closing his machzor. His congregation stood in shock.

After a second pause, the Rebbe raised his voice again. "But we are guilty of sins that are not written in the machzor. We sinned in our faith and trust in our Creator. Did we not doubt Hashem out of despair and hopelessness in the camps? When we recited Shema at night, we hoped that it would be our last haMapil, that the end of our suffering would come. How many times did we pray, 'Master of the Universe, I have no more strength. Take my soul so I will not have to recite Modeh Ani anymore'? And when the sun rose and we were obligated to thank Hashem for 'returning my soul with great mercy,' we were consumed with anger and rage. When we removed the corpses from the barracks, weren't we jealous of those lucky people who had died?"

"This is how we have sinned. We have sinned with a lack of faith and trust. We must beat our chests and admit our sins. We must ask the Almighty to restore our faith and trust in Him. Trust in God forever. Trust in Him at all times, nation! Pour your hearts out before Him."¹

This anecdote is incredible on many levels, and for our discussion it reveals a crucial distinction between two areas of our spiritual lives: our actions and our core connection to Hashem. On Yom Kippur we introspect and reflect on these two aspects in our lives. We take an accounting of our actions, specific misdeeds and shortcomings, and we articulate them in our Viduy. We also address a second component — our core connection with Hashem. This is our essential relationship with Him, which transcends specific mitzvot.

What does my personal relationship with Hashem look and feel like? Do I ever address Hashem directly, in the second person, to cultivate our relationship?

In the case of the Klausenberger, these two realms were bifurcated. There were no actions for which the survivors, who had endured horrifying experiences beyond what we today could ever truly fathom, needed to address.² They were not culpable for any specific actions. However, the Rebbe clearly felt the essential relationship with Hashem needed a Yom Kippur focus and renewal. In his message,

the Rebbe distinguished between the relationship to mitzvot and the relationship to Hashem. This is a fundamental concept in Judaism. All of the mitzvot that we observe are emanations from Hashem that descend into our world through many levels of transformation until they take the shape of a physical action. However, our connection to Hashem Himself, as it were, exists in a direct way through our inner self, our neshama. While each mitzvah is a crucial and indispensable link that is essential to cultivating our relationship with Hashem, our performance of all of the mitzvot do not automatically equal a meaningful and mindful relationship with Him.

This distinction between specific actions and a core connection can explain the specific arrangement of the Rambam's *Laws of Teshuva*.

The Rambam begins his *Laws of Teshuva* addressing the requirement to redress our mistakes, our flawed actions. Hence, he discusses the process of *kaparah* (atonement) — in chapter 1 and then defines the steps of the teshuva process in chapter 2. However, in chapter 7, the Rambam speaks no longer of teshuva for specific actions; he instead addresses teshuva in our relationship with Hashem. The Rambam is not referring to the typical requisite steps in mitzvah fulfillment; rather he is concerned about a profound inner search and desire to journey closer to Him. This is why only in chapter 7 does the Rambam extol the transformational nature of teshuva. In this context, the *baal teshuva* feels the close connection and deep relationship with Hashem. This cannot be measured in halachic terms of fulfillment; hence, the Rambam

simply exhorts us to aspire — *yishtadel* — to approach this genuine and profound relationship with our Father in heaven.

Similarly, this distinction between observing mitzvot and nurturing our connection with Hashem can explain the words of Hoshea. In understanding the word *ad* — until — in Tanach and halacha, our sages note that it has two possible connotations: inclusive and exclusive. In our context³ the Gemara quotes Rabbi Yochanan who interprets *shuva Yisrael ad Hashem* as a vehicle to return us to Hashem to the extent of “*ad v’lo ad b’chlal*” — up to but not including. This indicates that the return of *ad*, the first pasuk, is an incomplete return. Only at the second stage when we return “*el Hashem*”

is our return to Hashem complete. The first return is the teshuva for actions, as the pasuk concludes, *ki chashalta ba’avonecha* — for we have stumbled in our sins. The second is our return to Hashem directly, to our essential relationship borne out of an intimate, direct conversation — *k’chu imachem devarim v’shuvu el Hashem*. With our words — our open direct conversation with Hashem — we rebuild our core connection, our relationship.

Both of these elements — the actions and the relationship — are essential to our spiritual lives, and much of our Yom Kippur Machzor is devoted to the first. We cannot seriously consider a true relationship with Hashem devoid of a committed life of actions. However, we should be

careful not to ignore or overshadow the second. In fact, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik zt”l observed that “the most important thing in life is to feel the presence of the Almighty and the gentle pressure of his hand resting upon my frail shoulder.”⁴ The “Chalban” (Rav Chaim Cohen zt”l) provides an analogy to appreciate the importance of the core connection in the form of a young couple in love separated and then reunited.⁵ While separated, the husband sends his beloved various items to maintain their connection, including a pair of gloves and a hat. Upon receiving the items in the mail, the wife holds and caresses them as a physical reminder and connection to her beloved. She stares at them and smells them to detect her husband’s scent. Finally,

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the husband returns home and the couple retreat for an intimate moment to their private room and embrace deeply. Wouldn't it be odd if in the presence of the husband for whom she had waited with baited breath, she reaches for his hat and caresses it? Instead of focusing on the object of her love, she directs her attention to such a small detail; it would be bizarre! Similarly in our spiritual world, mitzvot are the physical manifestations of Hashem's connection with our world as mentioned earlier. They are divine, spiritual elements that have undergone many transmutations. They are akin to the gloves and hat of our beloved — cherished in his absence. However, in contrast to our actual closeness to Hashem they pale. When we recite a bracha on a mitzvah we relate the action to Hashem in the third person — *b'mitzvotav* — while our words and connection with Hashem are direct in the second person — *atah*. Our direct connection with Hashem transcends these individual actions.

On Yom Kippur, we experience immense joy, as the Talmud (*Taanis* 28b) observes, since on Yom Kippur we receive forgiveness for our sins. However, this is not the ultimate joy of Yom Kippur. The profound joy that we should aspire to appreciate on Yom Kippur is the incredible closeness that we merit to experience with Hashem himself. The fact that *mikveh Yisrael Hashem* — that we literally immerse in the presence of Hashem on this day —

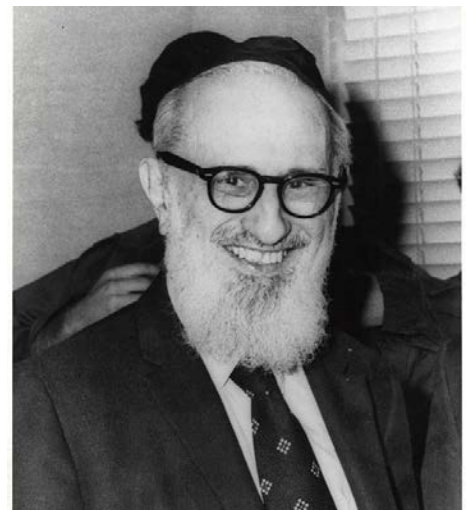
is not marvelous in that it provides atonement,⁶ but that it is a rare experience of Divine closeness. It was because of this sublime joy that Rabbi Soloveitchik felt personally that he was unable to eat for hours after the close of Yom Kippur.⁷ He continued to live simply in the afterglow of the Yom Hakadosh and its Divine closeness.

While we may not achieve this level of spiritual connectedness in our lives, it provides a guidepost. It reminds us to ask ourselves on Yom Kippur not just how many Al Chets we have recited and what steps of the teshuva process we have fulfilled, but what our personal, direct connection with Hashem is. What does my personal relationship with Hashem look and feel like? Do I ever address Hashem directly, in the second person, to cultivate our relationship? Yom Kippur is a time to focus on where Hashem is in our lives, and the chance for this core connection is most opportune as Hashem's presence comes to spend this day with each one of us.

Endnotes

1. *The Klausenberger Rebbe: The War Years*, pp. 185-186. The entire Yom Kippur experience of the Rebbe in Fohrenwald, including his meeting with General Eisenhower the next morning, is documented in *Lieutenant Birnbaum*.

2. It is noteworthy that the Rebbe went to heroic and superhuman lengths to observe mitzvot during the Holocaust; he never ate non-kosher food, even *bishul akum*, during his entire imprisonment including Auschwitz, a death march and forced labor in the Muldorf forest.



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3. According to the textual version of the *Bach* and *Masores Hashas* in *Yoma* 86b.

4. "A Tribute to the Rebbetzin of Talne," *Tradition* 17:2, 77.

5. *Talelei Chaim, Veyached Ivaveinu*.

6. Rabbi Soloveitchik notes that the language of the Kohen Gadol's Vidui — *BaShem* — with the name of G-d indicates that we receive atonement by being close to Hashem's name — His presence.

7. Related by Rabbi Menachem Genack in the name of Rabbi Soloveitchik's daughter in "*Ish Yom Hakippurim*" from *Memories of a Giant: Eulogies in Memory of Rabbi Dr. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Zt"l*, p. 163.



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