

Rosh Hashanah, 5781, 2020:

Rejoining Hashem

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, Dovid Shmuel ben Chasiyah and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

In a few days we will be standing before Hashem on Rosh Hashanah. Each of us will ask our Creator's forgiveness for sins we committed over the course of the preceding year.

Since this is the case, we must ask a deceptively simple question: "What is sin?"

In broad terms, sin is any violation of Hashem's will. More specifically, however, three different kinds of sin are mentioned in the Torah passage that follows the most grievous violation we committed as a nation, namely, the *Eigel HaZahav* —the Sin of the Golden Calf:

And the L-rd passed before him [Moshe] and proclaimed: "Hashem, Hashem, G-d, Who is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abundant in loving kindness and truth, preserving loving kindness for thousands, forgiving *avon* —iniquity and *pesha* — rebellion and *chata'ah* — sin..." (*Sefer Shemot* 34:6-7, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, with my emphasis and emendations for the purpose of clarity)

In this *pasuk*, Hashem teaches us that He forgives three distinct types of sin: *avon*, *pesha*, and *chata'ah*. In his *Commentary on the Torah*, Rashi (1040-1105) explains *avon* as a purposeful sin, a sin performed with full knowledge that it is wrong; the person's better judgment is overcome. Such an individual has lost the battle and has succumbed to base and lowly instincts. Hedonistic pursuits have become master. *Avon* takes place when an

individual loses self-control and is ruled by raw desire. Nonetheless, such people have not forsaken their relationship with G-d, but rather, they have forsaken their relationship with themselves by violating their intrinsic holy status.

Pesha is a far more grievous type of sin than *avon*. Rashi explains that it refers to purposeful acts of rebellion against G-d. In an act of *pesha*, an individual simultaneously challenges and rejects the Almighty's role as Master of the Universe. Those who commit a *pesha* repudiate G-d's hegemony and power and, instead, place themselves on His throne. Their rebellious actions undertaken with knowledge, forethought and temerity falsely proclaim that they are the ultimate authority in the universe.

Chata'ah is different in kind and degree than the previous types of sin for, in such a case, there is no desire to do wrong. There is no pleasure-seeking urge run amok, or desire to dethrone the Almighty. Instead, one who is involved in a *chata'ah* does so as a result of a lack of the requisite Torah knowledge that would have prevented the forbidden action; as such, it is an inadvertent sin. *Chata'ah* teaches us that a failure to learn Torah precludes the possibility of correctly living according its precepts. In short, *chata'ah* occurs when people fail to live up to all that they could have been — if only they would have engaged in sincere Torah study in order to properly follow Hashem's *mitzvot*.

Teshuvah, returning to Hashem, is our greatest antidote against sin's destructive poison. It is one of the Almighty's greatest gifts, as it enables us to return to the correct path and reestablish our relationship with Him. My rebbi and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), gave eloquent voice to these ideas:

What, therefore, is *teshuvah* in contrast to *sin*? Ascent versus descent. Through sin one is an object, while *teshuvah* allows one to again become a subject. Through sin man is acted upon, while through *teshuvah* man can act once again. Through sin he is a thing, while through *teshuvah* he becomes a person. Through sin gravity overwhelms, while through *teshuvah* gravity is overcome. (From a 1974 lecture, summarized by Dr. Arnold Lustiger in *Before Hashem You Shall Be Purified: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on the Days of Awe*, page 34)

May Hashem help us encounter our sins so that we may ever ascend, and never descend.

Moreover, may we become the masters of our actions, as we grow in our recognition that He is the Master of the Universe. Most of all, when we stand in prayer this Rosh Hashanah, and seek to encounter the King of the Universe once again, may each of us remember Yirmiyahu's celebrated words: "*Hashiveinu Hashem alecha v'nashuvah... — Restore us to You, O L-rd, that we may be restored!*" (*Megillat Eichah* 5:21) *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom, *Kativah v'Chatimah Tovah*, and may Hashem in His great mercy remove the *magafah* from *klal Yisrael* and from all the nations of the world.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>
They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha's* name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.