

Corona Diary # 13 Stretching Teshuvah During Corona

Moshe Taragin

Summer has concluded, schools have "restarted" and the scent of Ellul is in the air- punctuated every morning by the blaring shofar and at night by solemn selichot. Our religious sensitivities shift into "Ellul mode"- introspection, moral inventory and, ultimately, the desire for metamorphosis. The Chasam Sofer would remark that even the walls shake at the onset of Ellul. Though the religious intensity of this period can sometimes be frightening, this month-long experience promises growth and transformation.

Teshuvah can only be authentic if it partakes of our contemporary context. Without question, the process of moral recovery and religious transformation is timeless and unaffected by shifts in the human condition. The Talmud Yerushalmi comments that teshuvah actually preceded human history by two thousand years - implying that teshuvah is an eternal experience unrelated to current events or cultural changes.

Yet, teshuvah as an act of Man, is also influenced by the cultural and historical context. The process of repentance can't be severed from the setting and from the 'mood' of a particular period. We are definitely living through a unique period in human history and it is crucial to identify the particular tone or voice of teshuvah which matches this transformational period.

Typically, teshuvah is an "inward experience"- a deep dive into the soul. We probe the entirety of our lives - from the actual sins we violated to the horrible traits we are saddled with, to

the immense potential we have wasted through indolence and laziness. An honest and thorough religious inventory should yield both character transformation as well as a rehabilitation of our relationship with G-d. In the great mussar school of Slobodka a popular Ellul phrase was "teshuvah es nisht zu zein a besere mensch, nahr zu zein an andere mentsch- teshuvah isn't merely [characterized] by the aim to become a better person but to become a different person". Expanding that motto, it may be added that teshuva isn't only becoming a different person but also restoring our relationship with G-d. For this transformation to occur we must study ourselves lives down to the most detailed aspects of our lives.

However, there is an entirely different scope of teshuva – one which isn't inward but outward and which doesn't focus upon personal examination but rather assesses the state of our broader world. In his ground breaking sefer known as "Orot Ha'teshuvah", Rav Kook showcased the broader syllabus of teshuva: The entire universe is constantly surging toward teshuvah- toward a return to a full alignment with G-d. Comprehensive personal teshuva participates in this broader process: sin has separated us from the natural alignment with the will of G-d and with the world around us. Teshuvah restores us to a more fully synced state with G-d and His Universe. Full teshuva demands not only micro-analysis of our personal behavior but also assessing the state of our broader world and trying to advance it toward a more redeemed condition. Rav Kook described this process in mystical or kaballistic terms, but even without invoking kaballistic concepts, an entirely different vista of teshuva emerges: restoring the universe – and not an individual, to a closer interaction with, and recognition of, G-d.

It would appear that our current year demands a greater emphasis upon this broader sweep of teshuva. Obviously, we are never exempted from the thorough and tenacious self-assessment and self-critique vital to religious improvement. The Corona crisis doesn't acquit us from basic religious and moral responsibilities to continually improve ourselves. Our "chest-beating" during the recitation of viduy confessional cannot be any less fervent simply because we live in a confusing and confounding reality.

However, in addition to the classic demands of teshuvah, this year we are mandated to consider the broader "state" of our world. On many levels it feels as if the world is less functional than it was a year ago. The toll in human suffering during the past year is staggering. Sadly, for many, G-d is far less visible in a world shrouded by darkness and death. Economic and social vulnerabilities have been unmasked and the world feels less stable and less firm. It appears that the world requires a teshuvah process – a process of rehabilitation and spiritual restoration. Does human suffering disturb us? Does the less visible presence of G-d upset us? Can our personal renovation contribute to a broader reformation? These "Rav Kook" inspired questions are particularly pressing this year.

An additional tonality to our teshuvah of 2020 concern our recognition of freedom of choice. A pandemic can be very enfeebling; human beings are reduced to statistics and our sense of individual autonomy is challenged. Teshuva must also re-empower us to believe in our own capacity not only to transform our identity but also to redeem a world which feels more broken than ever. In a world of statistical inevitability teshuva must reinforce the belief in the absolute freedom of choice which every individual possesses. It seems as if the

teshuva horizons this year include a more global outlook- assessing the state of our world, dreaming of a better place, and reaffirming human capacity to reform a sometimes incorrigible reality.

The corona crisis challenges us to broaden our view of teshuva but it also enables a more honest and forthright inner conversation with G-d. Teshuva is predicated upon an honest dialogue with G-d; during the course of the year we hide from both ourselves and certainly from G-d. The gravitas and solemnity of this period helps create a more honest and candid rendezvous with G-d, yet, sadly it is difficult to be completely honest- even during the climax of neilah davening. Human beings are fraught with dishonesty and delusion and even our most sincere moments are haunted by the prospect of likely failure. How are we to speak with G-d if our tongues are dishonest and our hearts deceitful? G-d only accepts honest hearts and true words!

Fortunately, there is a different route toward successful communication with G-d: he listens to a broken heart-"karov Hashem l'nishberei leiv". This year we are all fractured people with broken hearts. Our world has shrunk, our dreams have been smashed, and our futures have been muddled. Everyone has lost something during this crisis and this loss has broken us. If we are more broken this year than in past years, we are also more prepared for a candid conversation with G-d. In some ways, corona has provided us a head start for teshuvah. Typically, several weeks of introspection are necessary to reach the state of broken heartedness. This year we begin the process as broken people and hopefully our conversation will be real and raw. We have spent months living life without layers and without coverups. Hopefully we will approach our meeting with G-d with that same unadorned gritty realism.

