

Do We Deserve a Corona Discount this Yom Kippur?

Moshe Taragin

Personal success in life is about "stretching": can we transcend our current confines to achieve even higher ground? In many ways, teshuva is the "greatest stretch": can we stretch beyond our current personalities and transform into someone we are currently not? Teshuva requires tremendous emotional energies: honesty intensity, courage and tenacity.

This year's Yom Kippur is obviously very very different. Deprived of our normal places of tefillah, and facing shortened prayer services, our teshuva horizons feel confined. What does G-d expect of us under these compromised teshuva conditions? Does He relax His expectations of his suffering children? Should we compromise our own expectations? Is there a "Corona discount" for this Yom Kippur?

Without question, teshuva is metered based on our abilities, and when our resources are diminished, G-d expects less. The gemara (Menachot 110) notes that the identical phrase 'rei'ach nicho'ach' characterizes both expensive sacrifices of the wealthy, as well as well as meager sacrifices of the impoverished. By employing the same term and referring to each sacrifice as "pleasing", the Torah stresses that humans are not expected to perform teshuva beyond their 'means' – as long as the process is driven by passion and devotion. Likewise, fervent and genuine teshuva which may be restricted by Corona limitations will generate the very same "rei'ach nichocah" and will be accepted by G-d just as He accepts our more "enhanced teshuva" conducted under more optimal conditions.

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However, the Corona discount isn't just a 'markdown' validating lesser versions of teshuva; it also provides a discount or a rebate during our sentencing for the upcoming year. Life beats us down through the struggles, defeats and disappointments we endlessly face. When G-d judges us, He factors in these struggles to "offset" some of the punishment we may deserve for our behavior. Rabenu Sa'adia Gaon – the 10th century philosopher and author, composed a confessional text which we recite on Erev Rosh Hashana. This confessional acknowledges that the brutal suffering of Jews in exile partially offsets our sentence and we receive clemency. Likewise, in his Tefillah Zakah, a confessional recited on Erev Yom Kippur, Rav Avraham Danzig, the 18th century Polish author of the Chayei Adam, asks G-d to balance our sentencing based on the daily struggles of raising a family. If we ask G-d to "factor in" these common challenges aren't we justified in asking Him to "factor in" the struggles we have faced this past year. Corona has taken something from everyone and has upended our reality. As we pray for forgiveness, we ask G-d to factor in our loss, our sadness, our anxiety about the future, and whatever personal dreams have vanished.

These are the two Corona discounts we are allowed to request of G-d this year. We offer as much teshuva energy as we can but our teshuva accomplishments are judged based on our limited resources. We further ask Him to consider 'time served' during the past half year.

Alternatively, and even ironically, G-d's Corona teshuva demands may be more severe. There are many different teshuva motivators. Sometime we are inspired through personal introspection and sometimes by the unquenchable desire to improve our station in life. However, crisis is the most powerful and compelling impetus to teshuva. When G-d speaks

to us- and He often speaks by challenging us with adversity- we are expected to listen. The gemara comments that the ring of King Achashverosh being placed upon Haman's hand was more effective in prompting a national teshuva than 55 prophets whose teshuva pleas were ignored for hundreds of years. In fact, one of the great crimes of the Jews during the First Temple era, was their intransigent disregard of these repeated appeals. Crisis drives even the stubborn-hearted to repentance.

G-d is speaking to us this year louder than ever, and if we don't respond we will be held more accountable. The Corona world feels random and serendipitous but every life and death decision is Divinely decreed. We may not possess the computational skill to understand these Divine algorithms but they exist. In parshat Bechukotai, the Torah describes a suffering nation which, none the less, insists that their trials are circumstantial rather than a Divine message. This delusional response causes G-d to further withdraw His supervision, and to enable the randomness we had erroneously imagined. Living through a year of unmistakable Divine messages, we cannot ignore the call to teshuva. No one knows what G-d is saying but we all know that he is speaking with us and speaking to us personally.

Additionally, the Corona world has positioned us upon a more emotionally advantageous "teshuva platform". It typically takes forty days to reach the point in which we realize that human life is a "broken shard, withering grass, a fading flower, a passing shade, a dissipating cloud, a blowing wind, flying dust, and a fleeting dream (Netaneh Tokef prayer), so that we can begin to pray not to "fade that quickly". This year we are all fading fast and it shouldn't be that difficult to lock into desperation mode and begin to daven to halt the fading. Dovid Hamelech reminds us that G-d is close to those with a broken

heart. Typically, we struggle to shatter our confident and calm hearts so that G-d can hear our broke- hearted prayers. This year we all approach Him already broken and battered, and He is ready to listen. If we don't speak this year we will be even more blameworthy.

To summarize, in some ways G-d, will discount our Corona teshuva given our limitations and our suffering. We will receive an "achievement discount": if we are unable to achieve past levels of repentance, G-d will adjust our 'score' based upon our limited resources; He will also factor in the suffering of the past half year and calibrate our sentencing. We will not be given an "effort discount" or an "authenticity discount" or a "communication discount". This year we have a greater mandate to listen to His message and to speak to him with honesty and humility.

Of course, beyond questioning what G-d's expectations are, we should ask ourselves about our own expectations. Do we perform teshuva solely because of Divine expectations and demands? Or, do we value the opportunity to re-landscape our past, reboot our personalities and rehabilitate our relationship with G-d. At some point, Corona will fade but our relationship with G-d is eternal and will outlast human events. It seems absurd to reduce our efforts at building that eternity simply because we are struggling so mightily with a fleeting crisis? Legally, we may be excused from certain teshuva milestones but teshuva is a gift and why would we disregard this great gift simply because we possess an excuse or a discount. G-d may expect less from us but we still should try to dream broadly and powerfully.