



OVERCOMING SHAME AND SELF-DOUBT TO ANSWER THE CALL TO TESHUVA

In the early 1930s the Nazis ym”s had gained significant political standing in Germany and were becoming a growing threat to the Jewish people. Rav Yerachmiel Cofnas recalled¹ a particular Shabbos, late in the afternoon, sitting in the home of the saintly Chofetz Chaim.² The room had already grown dark and the Chofetz Chaim pierced the silence when he began to speak in a low tone about the *chevlei mashiach* (the birth pangs of the redemptive process). It was clear from the tremor in his voice that he saw or at least sensed the atrocities of the Holocaust that tragically lay ahead.

Klal Yisrael are in a grave situation and are approaching a very difficult period of time. We have to do teshuvah, daven, and accept upon ourselves to improve our ways so that HaKadosh Baruch Hu will save us... We must make a group of baalei teshuvah, to help bring the Mashiach. I will be the first to be registered on the “Chevras Baalei Teshuvah.” I accept upon myself to increase my Torah and mitzvos as a merit for Klal Yisrael. Who is going to be the next one on the list? Who is the next one to put his name down on the “Chevras Baalei Teshuvah?”

The room remained silent. From the yeshiva leadership to the students who

were present, nobody uttered a word. The Chofetz Chaim banged on the table.

“Who is next? Why are you silent?” He continued to bang as he began to cry bitter tears. “*Eis tzora hee l’yaakov, a tragic time is upon us, it is the chevlei mashiach. You have no idea of the pain that Klal Yisrael is going to go through...*”

We may wonder: Why did those holy Jews gathered in the Chofetz Chaim’s home hesitate to respond to his desperate pleas? Or said differently, what impediments hinder us from confidently and wholeheartedly returning to Hashem?

The Necessity and Apparent Simplicity of Teshuvah

It appears that the Chofetz Chaim drew his instruction from Chazal (see *Yoma* 87b) as clearly codified in the words of Rambam, that *teshuvah* is a prerequisite for *geulah*.

כל הנביאים כולן צוו על התשובה ואין ישראל נגאלין אלא בתשובה וכבר הבטיחה תורה שסוף ישראל לעשות תשובה בסוף גלותן ומיד הן נגאלין שנאמר והיה כי יבאו עליך כל הדברים וגו' ושבת עד ה' אלקיך ושב ה' אלקיך וגו'.

All of the Nevi'im commanded concerning repentance; the Jewish people will not be redeemed except by way of repentance. Indeed, the Torah long since assured us that in the end, at the close of the period of exile, Bnei Yisrael will turn to repentance and be immediately redeemed...

Hilchos Teshuvah 7:5

The Gemara (*Shabbos* 31a) describes six questions that each person will be called upon to answer when brought to judgment at the conclusion of our earthly existence. The questions address and reflect upon our commitment to fundamental Torah goals and values. However, the *Avodas Yissaschar*³ of Volbroz [Poland] speaks of a broader overarching question that we will have to confront as part of our heavenly accounting as well. The question, rhetorical in nature, is: why did we hesitate to actualize the opportunity of *teshuvah*? Sin is an unfortunate but inevitable part of the

human experience.⁴ Yet Hashem has granted us the gift of *teshuvah* to right some of our wrongs. Why then do we often act as if *teshuvah* remains beyond our grasp?

Ironically, it seems from the Torah's presentation of *teshuvah* that it is in fact meant to be accessible and easily achieved.

כי קרוב אליך הדבר מאד בפיך ובלבבך לעשותו.

The matter is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it.

Devarim 30:14

If “the matter”⁵ is indeed so close, why do we live with a sense, albeit a false perception, that repentance is not so easy at all?

Facing the Shame and Finding Comfort in Our Unbreakable Bond

The Selichos that lead us to Rosh Hashana and officially begin the Yamim Noraim period⁶ open with the phrase, “*lecha Hashem hatzedaka v'lanu boshes ha'panim*” — You Hashem are charitable, and we are shame-faced. While the Jewish soul craves the opportunity to return to Hashem, the shame and embarrassment of sin is perhaps what makes it so difficult for us to face our Creator. We feel burdened by the failed promises of years past that weigh heavily on our minds and our hearts. But ultimately, we must find a way to “perform this mitzvah” despite

the uneasiness and discomfort that we often feel in this spiritual cleansing process.

The sin of the *Cheit Ha'egel* was particularly shameful and devastating given the timing and context in which it occurred. Such a hurtful betrayal seemed like a sin from which the Jewish people would never truly recover. In fact, Rabbi Yitzchak is cited in the Gemara, *Sanhedrin* 102a, as stating that, “there is no punishment that comes to the world in which there is not a small portion of the sin of the Golden Calf,” indicating that we are still repaying our debts and living with its consequences until this very day.

Yet it is precisely after such an egregious sin as *Cheit Ha'egel* that the Jewish nation is introduced to a new and unique *teshuvah* “prayer technique” in the form of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy.⁷

וַיַּעֲבֹר ד' עַל פְּנֵי, וַיִּקְרָא, ד' ד', א-ל-רַחוּם וְחַנוּן אַרְךָ אַפַּיִם, וְרַב-חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת. נִצַּר חֶסֶד לְאַלְפִים, נִשְׂא עוֹן וְפָשַׁע וְחַטָּאָה, וְנִקְּהָ, לֹא יִנְקָה פֶקֶד עוֹן אָבוֹת עַל בְּנֵים וְעַל בְּנֵי בְנֵים, עַל שְׁלֹשִׁים וְעַל רַבְעִים.

Hashem passed before him and proclaimed: “Hashem! Hashem! a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness; extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; yet He does not remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generations.”

Throughout the Yamim Noraim, we return time and again to these expressions of Divine favor to guide us through the *teshuvah* process. The Gemara (*Rosh Hashana* 17b) notes how remarkable a gift these words are and emphatically recommends

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that they be used to achieve true forgiveness.

"ויעבור ה' על פניו ויקרא" א"ר יוחנן אלמלא מקרא כתוב אי אפשר לאומר, מלמד שנתעטף הקב"ה כשליח צבור והראה לו למשה סדר תפלה. אמר לו כל זמן שישראל חוטאין יעשו לפני כסדר הזה ואני מוחל להם. *The verse states: "And Hashem passed by before him and proclaimed" (Exodus 34:6). Rabbi Yochanan said: Were it not explicitly written in the verse, it would be impossible to say this, as it would be insulting to God's honor. The verse teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, wrapped Himself in a prayer shawl like a prayer leader and showed Moses the structure of the order of the prayer. He said to him: Whenever the Jewish people sin, let them act before Me in accordance with this order [i.e. let the prayer leader wrap himself in a prayer shawl and publicly recite the thirteen attributes of mercy] and I will forgive them.*

Rosh Hashana 17b (Translation from The William Davidson digital edition of the Koren Noé Talmud)

The Thirteen Attributes of Mercy begin with the phrase "Hashem Hashem,"⁸ which the Gemara, *Rosh Hashana* 17b, so beautifully interprets, "I am Hashem before a person sins, and I am Hashem after a person sins and performs repentance."

Hashem is encouraging us and inviting us into the *teshuvah* process by reminding us, despite our shame, that there is a constant bond we share with Him from which to draw strength.

Hashem calls out to us: "I knew the

essence of your being before you sinned. I had awareness of your sin before you even committed it and I certainly know now what you have done. Nonetheless, I willingly choose to remain as your God. There is an eternal relationship that we share that sin cannot sever. We are bound with an unbreakable connection that no sin can dissolve. Your sin has left you with a (false) perception that we are no longer connected. But if you return to Me with sincerity, humility and heartfelt *teshuvah*, you will recognize that "Hashem, Hashem" — our bond was never truly broken.

This lesson finds full expression⁹ in a costly failure that occurred in the early stages of settling the Land of Israel. After defeating Yericho, Yehoshua very clearly warns the nation to refrain from taking of the spoils of war; all is to be consecrated to Hashem. *Achan*, a member of the tribe of Yehuda, surreptitiously violates Yehoshua's command by taking from the consecrated possessions. As a result, Divine protection is somewhat withheld, and it leads to the tragic death of 36 Jews in the following battle against Ai. Hashem expresses His disappointment:

חָטָא יִשְׂרָאֵל וְגַם עֲבְרוּ אֶת בְּרִיתִי אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִי אוֹתָם וְגַם לָקְחוּ מִן הַחֲרָם וְגַם גָּנְבוּ וְגַם כָּחֲשׂוּ וְגַם שָׂמוּ בְכַלְיָהֶם.

The Jewish people have sinned. They have broken the covenant by which they were commanded. They have taken from the consecrated possessions.

Yehoshua 7:11

The Gemara, *Sanhedrin* 44a, in a startling series of comments, makes every effort to identify additional sins committed by Achan ranging from broad violations of the Five Books of the Torah to sexually immoral activity.

Why does the Gemara delve beyond the text of the Navi to place additional guilt upon Achan? Why would Chazal actively seek to highlight the array of sinful behavior displayed by Achan?

The Chasidic master Rav Tzaddok hakohen of Lublin¹⁰ (1823-1900) resolves this very question by emphasizing the depth of the surprising and ironic conclusion to this Talmudic analysis of Hashem's rebuke of Achan and the entire Jewish nation.

חטא ישראל אמר רבי אבא בר זבדא אע"פ שחטא ישראל הוא.

"Chata Yisrael" R. Abba bar Zavda said that from here it may be inferred that even when the Jewish people have sinned, they are still called "Israel."

R. Abba continues by citing the colloquial adage:

היינו דאמרי אינשי אסא דקאי ביני חילפי אסא שמיה ואסא קרו ליה.

Even when a myrtle is found among thorns, its name is myrtle and people call it myrtle.

Rav Tzaddok explains that even in those painful moments of realization that we have been "caught" in a state of sin, at times an abundance of sin, we are still lovingly called "Yisrael." Hashem's outstretched right hand remains extended for those who



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have the courage and confidence to take hold of it. *“I am Hashem before a person sins, and I am Hashem after a person sins and performs repentance.”*

Rav Soloveitchik painted a picture and outlined a roadmap of the Yamim Noraim which helps us to overcome this self-doubt that can infiltrate the stability of our relationship with Hashem.

Im ki’banim, Im ki’avadim. On Rosh Hashanah, our relationship to Hashem is in doubt, as is evident from our equivocation in this liturgical portrayal, possibly as children, possibly as servants... In contrast, Yom Kippur represents “mercy in judgment.” Hashem then does not render his verdict as a monarch, but as a father, in accordance with R’ Akiva’s last statement in the Mishna of Yoma (8:9): “Happy are you, O Israel! Before Whom do you purify yourselves and Who purifies you?”

Your Father in Heaven.” A father does not generally render unmitigated strict judgment on a son. On Yom Kippur, we emerge victorious in judgment, because mercy is an intrinsic part of the judgment. Our relationship is no longer in doubt...¹¹

The Chofetz Chaim’s cry to join his “*Chevras Baalei Teshuva*” has yet to be fully answered. We should all believe that Hashem still desires us, despite our shortcomings, and answer his call.

Endnotes

1. *Paneach Tzafunos: Rabbi Yerachmiel Cofnas* (Biography) by Rabbi Moshe Boruch Katanka [pg. 71].
2. Rabbi Yisrael Meir haKohen Kagan Zt”l (1838-1933).
3. Rabbi Yissachar Dov (Berish) haKohen Tornheim Zy”a (1803-1877).
4. *Koheles* (7:20) states, “For there is not one righteous man on earth who does good and

doesn’t sin.” Note, however, *Shabbos* 55b for a discussion of four who never sinned.

5. There is, in fact, a discussion as to which “matter” the pasuk is referring to. This essay is following the understanding of Ramban, Sforno and Abarbanel who indicate that the specific mitzvah “matter” at hand is the mitzvah of teshuvah.

6. See *Magen Avraham, Orach Chaim* 88:3.

7. Different suggestions are offered how to divide the phrases of the thirteen attributes. Rabbeinu Tam (cited in Tosafos, *Rosh Hashanah* 17b) has one approach; while the Arizal (*Shaar Hakavanos – Drushei “va’yaavor”, drush 3*) has a different understanding.

8. This follows the position of Rabbeinu Tam that the first two *middos* (attributes) are (1) Hashem and (2) Hashem.

9. See *Sefer Yehoshua* chapters 6-7.

10. *Pri Tzaddik Parshas Tetzaveh, Siman 12; Lech Lecha Siman 3.*

11. *Before Hashem You Shall Be Purified: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on the Days of Awe*, pgs. 135-156 (Arnold Lustiger, 1998).



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