

The season of doubt

Moshe Taragin

The tochacha section of parshat Ki Tavo depicts horrifying scenes of wretched human suffering. As divine retribution for our ongoing national infidelity, we plummet into a dark world of destruction and chaos. A gruesome apocalypse unleashes a wave of fear and panic, numbing and confusing its victims. This dazed condition is described with the suggestive phrase of *timhon leivav*. Our wounded hearts are blanked and bewildered.

In addition to this condition of confusion and incomprehension, the term *timhon leivav* also portrays a syndrome of doubt and disbelief. Pain and suffering become so severe that we start to *doubt*: can this really be happening? Why is Hashem subjecting us to such nightmarish suffering? Will it ever end, or is this our new reality? Unmanageable suffering leads to incredulity and, regrettably, we lose certainty about our security, our future, and our very existence. *Timhon leivav* describes a muddled, Kafkaesque world of upheaval, which envelops us with agonizing doubt. The foundations of our reality begin to crumble.

Sins of religious doubt

Every Yom Kippur, in our extensive viduy-confessional known as 'al chet', we acknowledge sins of "timhon leivav". Evidently, the disorder of *timhon leivav* isn't limited to the tochacha nightmare of divine punishment, but afflicts our daily lives.

In the narrow sense, the crime of *timhon leivav* refers to sins of religious doubt. Often, when we grapple with the larger mysteries of life or with difficult personal struggles, we question Hashem's motives, or we doubt His reasons. When we face indecipherable questions, we wonder about Hashem. Even when we don't doubt His motives, we sometimes struggle to make Him relevant in our world. The world doesn't always feel godly, and we are often uncertain about His impact in our lives.

Faith is never perfect, and even devout believers experience passing moments of doubt and of religious uncertainty. We can forgive ourselves for these short-lived moments of religious qualms, but not for consuming doubt which grips our imagination and prevails over our

faith. Confessing the sins of timhon leivav, we apologize for the lingering doubt which vexes faith and thins our belief.

A culture of doubt

In a broader sense, our confession of timhon leivav addresses more than just theological wandering. Sadly, we occupy a world with too much doubt and not enough belief, and, as a result we have all become chronic skeptics.

We relentlessly suspect the accuracy of our news, because, in an internet age of unlimited information flow, we are swamped with fake news. Institutional trust is at an all-time low, and we possess little faith in public institutions such as government, corporations and communal organizations. When trust in public institutions attenuates, the fabric of society withers and, without common rallying points society falls into disunity. Distrust and doubt corrode social harmony and diminish any shared sense of common endeavor.

Tainted relationships

Doubt is contagious, and doubt in the public sector creeps into our private lives and infects our relationships. Instead of believing in people and affording them the benefit of the doubt, we assume the worst, and thereby, we corrupt our relationships. Sturdy relationships are built on trust and seeing the best in others. Even when we don't understand people's intentions, trust allows us to have faith in their motives. Trust provides confidence and enables dependance. When doubt sets into these relationships, they are quick to crumble.

Impostor Syndrome

At some point, when we exhaust people and institutions to doubt, we start to suspect the last possible target- ourselves. The modern world has introduced a new and harsh form of timhon leivav, referred to as "impostor syndrome". Highly successful people begin to doubt their talents, accomplishments, or ability to live up to other people's expectations. Am I really that successful, or have my accomplishments been accidental or lucky? Can I continue to live up to internal or external expectations, or will my true identity be revealed, exposing me as a fraud? Unhealthy and extreme timhon leivav gnaws at our conscience,

casting doubt over society, relationships, and even personal identity. For this we feel remorse and confess. Too much doubt and not enough conviction and belief.

Hashem gifted us with wisdom to discern right from wrong, true from false, and reality from fantasy. He also endowed us with passion to deeply believe in values, in other people, and most of all, in ourselves. He doesn't want us to live in a swirl of doubt, and when we slip into crippling *timhon leivav* we forfeit one of His greatest gifts. Our *timhon leivav* confession seeks *teshuva* and forgiveness for consenting to too much doubt and for ignoring conviction.

Too *little* doubt?

It is also fair to ask: shouldn't we also confess the sin of living without *enough* doubt. We all benefit from a *little more doubt*. Isn't a healthy degree of doubt crucial for integrity and for honest self-examination? Can we err in pursuing, as my teacher Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein wrote, "a passion for right that is insufficiently informed by introspection"? Without reasonable doubt, we become too cocky and too self-confident in our own views, and too dismissive toward others with opposing views. Our politically polarized world has radicalized our tendency to discredit any opinion which doesn't match our own, and to vilify those who possess differing views. Aside from being disrespectful to other human beings, brash confidence in our own exclusive truth invites simplicity and shallowness.

We live in an ideologically charged age in which we strongly identify with our religious, political, and ethnic identity. We have become so ideologically self-assured that we don't often turn the microscope inwards to probe our own values or to check their fitness. We are too busy incriminating alternate ideologies and too triumphant in taking ideological "victory laps", that we have eliminated doubt from our inner dialogue- if any internal dialogue even exists.

Healthy self-doubt leads to genuine introspection, and to the type of penetrating self-analysis which lays ourselves bare, but provides more authentic identity, more internalized values and most of all, personal integrity.

So, as we begin the season of repentance and improvement, we ask Hashem to remove doubt, but also to preserve it. In our search for Hashem and for belief, please help us remove doubt and darkness and provide clarity and contentment. Help us remove corrosive doubt and toxic skepticism from our world. Help us build trustful relationships of confidence and commitment. Help us believe in ourselves, our abilities and our accomplishments.

But also *put* doubt *into our heart*. Let this doubt soften us with intellectual humility and with respect for those who are different from us. Remove fake self-assurance and shallow certainty. Let us see clearly our authentic selves, even if that view is blurry. At least it is real.

Hashem, help us navigate the murky depths of *timhon leivav*.

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