

Yom Kippur: A Snowy Day at the Laundromat

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Evidently, religious crimes have a color!! Encouraging us to penitence, Yeshayahu the prophet exhorts us to whiten our "red" sins: "If your sins are like scarlet, whiten them like snow; if they are crimson red, bleach them as wool." The color red is synonymous with passion and desire, and is therefore designated as the color of sin. If red is the color of sin, white is the color of repentance, as it hints of a return to a more primitive state of purity.

Yeshayahu depicts two very different metaphors for whitening our red sins- snow and laundered wool. How do these two metaphors illustrate the experience of teshuva?

A process

Teshuva can often be exasperating, because it feels duplicitous. Recidivism is natural to human behavior, and often, our sincere teshuva-vows and heartfelt pledges for improvement, fade with the passing of time. In rare instances teshuva launches dramatic and long-term overhaul, but, more often, our genuine commitments wilt in the face of long-bred inescapable habits. We find ourselves continually trapped in a harsh cycle of teshuva, followed by religious failure, followed by recycled teshuva- a disheartening cycle of futility which deflates teshuva hopes. No one wants to feel like a two-faced hypocrite, and the specter of "teshuva-fraud" haunts our conscience.

Isaiah provides a solution to this teshuva quandary: similar to laundering clothing, teshuva is an incremental process with far reaching and long-term effects. Unlike laundering clothing,

snowfall inevitably melts and this season's snow doesn't contribute to next winter's accumulation. There is no continuity between different snowfalls.

Cleaning garments is a process which improves the clothing even after it becomes dirtied, as previously laundered clothing is easier to cleanse. Removing stains today will make them significantly easier to remove tomorrow.

Even if we regress post-teshuva, our negative habits have been softened, our religious sensitivity has been heightened, and our ability to recover from sin improved. Current teshuva is a long-term investment for future rounds of teshuva which, hopefully, will be more effective and less arduous. Teshuva is like cleaning clothing: its gains may be reversed, but they are never erased. Wash, rinse, repeat. Wash, rinse, repeat.

Hashem is our partner

Laundering wool requires significant exertion and human labor, especially in a pre-automation era before washing machines. Likewise, teshuva requires extraordinary emotional investment. Authentic change demands the honesty to acknowledge our flaws, the wisdom to chart recovery, and the courage to change our lifestyles, and sometimes, even our identities. Successful teshuva is a remarkable expression of unwavering self-honesty, free will, and fearless emotional courage. Much like scrubbing dirty linens, genuine teshuva requires massive emotional scouring.

By contrast, snow coats our world "effortlessly", through divinely delivered storms. Though teshuva is centered upon human decisions and human effort, it is also divinely assisted, and we must invite Hashem into the process itself. During our

uncertain moments of repentance, we look to Heaven and pray for His help. We look to Hashem to cure us of emotional callousness and to help us pray fervently rather than listlessly. We ask Him to help clear our minds of confusion and indecision, and to empty our hearts of crass desire and selfish cowardice. We hope that He will walk us through a dark and confusing forest of sin.

By comparing teshuva to snowfall, Yeshayahu wants us to invite Hashem into the process of teshuva, rather than shouldering this immense burden on our own.

Cover, don't cleanse

Dirtied clothing becomes discolored, and laundering them restores their original sheen and bright hue. By contrast, snow doesn't alter the color of the ground, but merely carpets it with a white plate. The color of the earth underneath snow hasn't been transformed, yet a snow-covered surface appears pure and undisturbed. The shiny gloss of a snow covered area, isn't intrinsic to the ground underneath, which remains darkened.

Ideally, we strive for transformational teshuva which reforms behavior and eliminates sin. However, teshuva comes in many varieties and when we don't achieve ideal teshuva we must be satisfied with lesser grades. One form of "partial teshuva" is a snow-like 'covering up' of our failures, even without correcting them. In healthy relationships, passion and commitment help us overlook annoyances and frustration. Love and affection "coverup" our hurt and disappointment. Even without resolving differences and clashes, love and devotion allow us to disregard them.

Our relationship with Hashem is no different, and short of attaining perfect teshuva, we hope for a snow-like covering of

our sins. We may have sinned egregiously, but we expect that our love for Hashem and His for us, "cover" those stains in the same manner that snow covers the ground.

Yom Kippur should not become solely a trip to a religious laundromat. It must also be a day of serene snow fall, in which the peaceful flakes of Hashem's love for us covers the ugliness of human betrayal and misconduct. Laundering wool reminds us that teshuva is incremental and a lifelong process.

Alternatively, snow-white teshuva comforts us with the confidence that Hashem actively collaborates with our teshuva, much the same way that He delivers snow. Additionally, snow reminds us that we may not be able to remove discoloration, but we can still cover it up with the exquisite radiance of our love for Hashem.

Horizons of teshuva

Successful teshuva is pivoted upon a searing process of penetrating self-introspection. Detailed micro-analysis of our behavior is vital to change, and without drilling down to our specific sins, teshuva will always be external and faint.

However, in addition to drilling down to details, teshuva must also stretch our imagination, beyond our particular sins and beyond our personality flaws. Repentance must address a broad sweep of our experience and the full totality of our personality. Just as no one would launder a single strand of wool, teshuva must cleanse the entire "garment" of our personas. How far can we stretch our teshuva? Can we eliminate sin, but also improve character? Can we calibrate our opinions and positions to better align them with religion and with moral integrity? Can we become more sensitive, more honest, more selfless, more idealistic, more courageous, and

more compassionate people? Can we clean our entire "wardrobe", and not just bleach an individual strand of wool?

Territories of teshuva

The image of snowfall also stretches our teshuva, but in a very different manner than the stretching of cleaning clothes. Snow doesn't fall on an isolated district, but covers an entire region or a broad territory. Widespread, snow-like teshuva demands that we consider a broader horizon, not just our own religious experience but the religious state of society. If teshuva is like snow it must "fall" upon a broad territory and not just upon our own small patch of land.

Who do we pray for on Yom Kippur and who do we seek penitence for? Our hopes and dreams on Yom Kippur cannot begin and end in our own backyard. Society is hurtling through tumultuous times and in dire need of moral instruction and religious inspiration. Our state is badly splintered and politically crippled, and still struggling with various forms of spiritual malaise.

During Yom Kippur, can we look out the window and imagine a healthier world, with more civility and less hostility. Can we pray for our state and its citizens to achieve the harmony we have waited for? Can we pray for a world closer to Hashem and to his spirit? Are we too busy scouring our souls with detergent that we don't notice the snow outside?

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