

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Mayer *ben* Eliyohu *a”h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

Going Through the *Teshuvah* Motions – Is There a Point?

PARSHAS VAYEILECH 5777

There are three *midrashic* teachings that may dramatically alter our perceptions of certain aspects of *teshuvah* (repentance).

The first involves the Prophet Hoshei’a’s exhortation to repent in this week’s *haftorah* – from which is derived the title of this special Shabbos, *Shabbos Shuvah*: **פֶּל הַנְּבִיאִים קוֹרְאִים לְשׂוּבָה לְתִשׁוּבָה... וְלֹא מְלַמְדִים אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל מָה לומר, אֲבָל הוֹשַׁע אָמַר עֲשׂוּ תִשׁוּבָה וּמְלַמְדִים מָה לְפִיּוֹסוֹ... שׁוּבָה לְתִשׁוּבָה... יִשְׂרָאֵל עַד ד' אֶלְקֵיךְ... קָחוּ עִמָּכֶם דְּבָרִים וְשׁוּבוּ אֵלַי... – “All the prophets would call to Yisrael to repent... but did not teach Yisrael what they should say. But Hoshei’a said, ‘Repent!’ and did teach them how to elicit appeasement... (He did so by proclaiming [*Hoshei’a 14:2,3*]: ‘Return, Yisrael, to Hashem your G-d... take words with you, and return to Hashem’” (*Pesiksa Rabbasi 44:7*).**

Apparently, there is something about Hoshei’a’s particular message that is both unique and original. To elucidate its meaning, we turn to some other passages involving the same legendary figures mentioned last week: Adam Harishon and his son Kayin. As noted, they each perpetrated a grave sin – Adam by partaking from the Tree of Knowledge and Kayin by murdering his brother. Their efforts at reconciliation, as we shall see, shed much light on the *teshuvah* process.

The Compromise

The *medrash* (*Bereishis Rabbah 22:13*) relates a somewhat mystifying conversation that took place between Adam and Kayin when the latter emerged from having stood before Hashem. As Kayin seemed quite pleased, Adam asked him how he had fared in judgment. Kayin replied: “I did *teshuvah* and so reached a compromise.” Upon hearing this, Adam was overwhelmed. “Such is the power of *teshuvah* – and I did not even know!” he declared. At first glance, it may seem somewhat difficult to understand what affected Adam Harishon so. A compromise? Is that the best *teshuvah* has to offer? Doesn’t real *teshuvah* atone for and eliminate sins? And what is the nature of this “compromise” to which Kayin refers?

One more teaching of Chazal involves a surprising statement issued by Adam himself. When initially asked by Hashem why he had violated His command, Adam answered: **הָאִשָּׁה... נָתְנָה לִי מִרְהֵעָ וָאֲכַל** – “The woman... gave me from the (fruit of the) tree, and I ate” (*Bereishis 3:12*). The *medrash* (*Bereishis Rabbah 19:12*) takes note of the grammatical construct of the final word; instead of the past-tense form – “*V’achalti* (and I ate) – Adam actually used a future-tense form – “*Va’ocheil*.” He thereby implied that not only had he eaten from the fruit in violation of Hashem’s command, but that he intended to repeat the offense in the future! He was telling Hashem: “I have eaten and will eat again.” Not only does this appear to constitute grave brazenness, but such an attitude is literally the antithesis to *teshuvah* and even deprives one of the ability to repent. As the Mishnah states (*Yoma 8:9*):

הָאוֹמֵר אֶחָטָא וְאָשׁוּב, אֶחָטָא וְאָשׁוּב, אֵין מְסַפִּיקוֹ בְּיָדוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת תִּשׁוּבָה.

“One who states: ‘I will sin, and then repent; I will sin, and then repent’ – (such an individual) is not afforded the ability to ever repent.”

How, then, can we understand what compelled Adam to respond to Hashem in this manner?

Tying it All Together

R' Tzaddok Hakohein (*Pri Tzaddik, parshas Vayeilech*) uncovers the true meaning behind Adam Harishon's reply. Of course, he did not intend to be rebellious, G-d forbid, and was in fact quite remorseful for his deed. The issue, as he saw it, was that he was now rendered incapable of repairing the damage and engaging in meaningful repentance. It was not out of spite or brazenness that he announced that he would "eat again"; rather, it was a recognition of the consequence of his action. By partaking of the forbidden fruit, he thereby brought the *yetzer hara* (evil inclination) into his inner essence; essentially, he had granted him free reign over his being. How, then, could he resist temptation in the future? He knew that he would likely stumble again; hence, he felt, any efforts at repenting would be for naught.

This is why Adam's encounter with Kayin awakened new hope within him. Adam knew Kayin for what he was and recognized that his repentance lacked real sincerity. And yet – to some extent, at least – his *teshuvah* was accepted! Of course, as it was far from a complete effort, it did not entirely wipe out Kayin's sin – as such, it was considered as a mere "compromise," whereby his punishment was somewhat mitigated. But it wasn't completely disregarded either. Thus, Adam was completely overwhelmed. He now understood that even "insincere" *teshuvah* – even if performed as a matter of mere lip service – still possessed some value. Simply mouthing the words "I have sinned" carries a certain amount of weight and can positively impact one's judgment. (How much more so, of course, if one engages in sincere *teshuvah*!)

And this, explains R' Tzaddok, is what separates Hoshei'a's call from that of the other prophets. It was not, of course, that there was something deficient about their messages. But even after exhorting them to return, the people still felt a sense of discouragement, for they had difficulty imagining that they could repent in a truly sincere and complete manner. The novelty Hoshei'a conveyed to them was that even their minimal and seemingly superficial efforts would bear some fruit. He thus encouraged that, at the very least, they fulfill the simple dictum: "*Kechu imachem devarim* – Take **words** with you." Even if all you do is mouth the words of *viduy* (confession), this is still a start and an accomplishment in its own right.

To be sure, it is not that one can "trick" Hashem and "get away with murder." The underlying principle is annunciated further by Hoshei'a, when he declares: "*Neshalmah farim sefaseinu* – We shall offer our lips as bullocks" (*Hoshei'a 14:3*). An actual sacrifice must be offered with the will and consent – the *ratzon* – of the owner. But there are times when one is obligated to bring a sacrifice but does not desire to do so. In such an instance, the *beis din* (rabbinic court) may take some drastic measures; they may even apply physical force until, under duress, he utters the words, "*Rotzeh ani* – I consent" (*Yevamos 106a*). One might have thought this to be merely a ruse; but the Rambam explains otherwise. Every Jew, at heart, desires to fulfill Hashem's will; it is only that his evil inclination gets in the way and clouds his true, pristine desire. Thus, after going through such an ordeal, his evil tendencies are subdued, and the inner *ratzon* to do what is right emerges once again (*cf. Hilchos Geirushin 2:20*). This, then, is the parallel between offerings and *teshuvah* – for the same principle applies. When uttering the words of *viduy*, a Jew is thereby connecting to and revealing the true feelings that lay in the inner recesses of his heart.

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