



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת היום

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת האזינו תשע"א ❧ Parshas Haazinu 5771

WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

As the Days of Awe approach, a certain sense of urgency and trepidation begins to take hold. In preparation for the upcoming Judgment, earnest Jews across the world seek inspiration to assist them on the path of *teshuvah* (repentance). In a well-known Mishnah, Hillel presents a series of introspective, rhetorical questions. His timely message provides important guidance for this crucial period. The Mishnah states (*Avos 1:14*):

הוא הִזָּה אוֹמֵר, אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי, מִי לִי? וְכִשְׁאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אֲנִי? וְאִם לֹא עֲכָשְׁיוֹ, אֵימָתִי?

“He (Hillel) would say: If I am not for myself, who is for me? And if I alone am for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?”

While these immortal words lend themselves to numerous interpretations, many commentators understand Hillel’s intent as an exhortation to *teshuvah*.

THE RIGHT COMBINATION

“If I am not for myself – Who is for me?” From the words of Rabbeinu Yonah (*Sha’arei Teshuvah*, 2:26), it appears that this question is addressed to those very seekers who wish to improve their character and Divine service. It’s just a matter of how to go about it.

You might find such noble individuals attending various *shiurim* (lectures) or *mussar shmuessin* (inspirational talks focusing on character development). They might look to the great men of the generation to hear inspiring words and encouragement about returning to Hashem and improving their ways. Such an endeavor is quite worthy, but the warning here is: *don’t rely completely on someone else to do teshuvah for you!*

No doubt, motivational speeches serve an essential purpose, as they can ignite a stirring in one’s soul. All too

often, however, the initial inspiration will quickly wear off. By pushing us back into our busy, daily routine, the *yetzer hara* is adept at cooling off our recharged batteries. Ultimately, it is up to the individual himself to really take the words of guidance to heart, review them, reflect on them, develop a plan of action, and carry it out. *If I am not for myself – who is for me?* No one else can do it for me.

On the other hand, total self-reliance can also be dangerous. The *Eitz Yosef* (*Avos, ibid.*) reminds us of a certain reality, as expressed by Shlomo Hamelech: “A person’s ways appear just in his own eyes” (*Mishlei 21:2*). By nature, a person has trouble identifying his faults; he usually thinks that his way is the correct way. And so an individual truly looking to grow may need a certain measure of external examination and to hear from another, unbiased party about which areas need improvement. To this end, Hillel warns us: *But if I alone am for myself – if I seek no outside critique and exhortation – what will become of me?* How, indeed, will it be possible to improve?

Hillel’s closing remarks are particularly compelling and relevant for this period.

THE VERDICT

While *teshuvah* is essential and accepted at all times, it is especially imperative in and around the Days of Judgment. Rosh Hashanah initiates the time period known as the *Aseres Yemei Teshuvah* (Ten Days of Repentance), wherein *teshuvah* is extremely effective – and attainable. Hillel’s words are certainly applicable: *If not now, when?* How tragic it would be were an individual to go through these auspicious days without any real soul-searching efforts!

One of the most vivid illustrations of this idea is provided by the Chofetz Chaim (*Toras Habayis, ch.*

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13). By hearing his words on this subject, one can almost sense the pain of this great sage as he laments a certain prevailing tendency and wonders what it will take for people to finally “awaken.”

The sad fact is that many people – even believing, well-intentioned individuals – tend to postpone active *teshuvah* engagement. Even those who make at least a token effort to choose a new path soon find themselves back at their old ways.

The Chofetz Chaim depicts an imaginary conversation between a sage and a regular Jew. What is sobering is that this same conversation could be applicable to almost any one of us.

SAGE: Reb Yid (“Dear Sir”), are you interested in ever doing *teshuvah*?

JEW: Of course!

SAGE: So, when will you do so?

JEW: I do hope – one day, when I have the time and presence of mind – to really sit down, do some serious reflecting, and perform a complete *teshuvah*.

SAGE: Have you ever attempted to do so until now?

JEW: Well, actually, every Yom Kippur, at least at Ne’ilah time, I make some resolutions about what needs to be fixed up.

SAGE: And – have you kept to them?

JEW: Not really...

SAGE: Can I ask you... do you believe in *s’char v’onesh* (Divine reward and punishment)?

JEW: Of course! It’s one of the thirteen Principles of Faith (#11)!

SAGE: Are you not aware that one day you will be summoned before the Heavenly Tribunal, who will review all of your deeds and issue a verdict?

JEW: Yes...

SAGE: If you don’t mind my asking... What would happen if, theoretically, you were to be summoned right here and now before that august body? Based on your current state, after all your deeds were “tallied up,” do you think you would be found worthy?

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JEW: Honestly... probably not.

SAGE: And what would happen if a bona fide *navi* (prophet) would appear right now, walk right up to you, and tell you that he knows with 100% certainty that you will be found guilty – might that shake you up a bit?

JEW: *Oy!* Then I would drop everything and engage in sincere and complete *teshuvah* right away!

SAGE: But that is exactly my point. Haven’t you yourself told me that many a Yom Kippur has gone by when you have made resolutions to improve, yet the good intentions never really came to fruition? It’s pretty safe to say that that trend will continue for years to come. If so, then isn’t it clear where things are headed? For all intents and purposes, haven’t you received “first-hand” information about your eventual fate? Isn’t it tantamount to having heard the news from an actual prophet?

If not now – when?