

INSIGHTS ON THE HIGH HOLIDAYS

A YOUNG ADULT PUBLICATION



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In Memory of
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By his loving family



Dedicated in Memory of
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The Compassionate Creator

Nathan Dweck

“Free will is granted to all men. If one desires to turn himself to the path of good and be righteous, the choice is his. Should he desire to turn to the path of evil and be wicked, the choice is his...Since free choice is granted to all men as explained, a person should always strive to do Teshubah and to confess verbally for his sins...”
(Rambam, *Hilkhos Teshubah* 5:1, 7:1)

HaRambam teaches us in these halakhos that man always has the choice between good and bad, and he has the free will to make that choice. Even if one is a sinner, he has the free will to do Teshuba- and he should always strive to return to God. Although it takes a lot of effort to do so, since he must refrain from doing that same action again, it is something available to us every day of the year.

However, how are we to understand such an institution, where any sinner can return to God no matter how severe a sinner he is? Is the sinner even worthy of such attention from God? In order to understand this, we must take a look into the story of a prophet- Yonah ben Amitai- who asked these same questions. Yonah, living before the destruction of Assyria in the 8th century B.C.E, was asked by God to complete a mission: Go to Nineveh- the capital of Assyria- and tell them that they have 40 days until their complete destruction. In essence, God was giving them the opportunity to repent and amend their ways.

Yonah, however, didn't deem this an appropriate manner for the God of Truth and Justice to deal with his creations. How can I, the prophet, be asked to go to the most evil city and archenemy of Israel and allow them the opportunity to repent? To what extent should justice be compromised?

Therefore, Yonah was very upset that after he went to this evil city, God accepted the immediate Teshubah of these wicked people. However, God was patient enough to educate Yonah on this matter. After Yonah set camp in a booth outside the city to oversee the city's fate, God provided him with a *qiqayon* to give him shade from the heat. Yonah was very happy about this, but when God took it away from him, Yonah fainted and asked God to die. God then tells Yonah something very powerful:

“You cared about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. And should not I care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well!” (*Yonah* 4:10-11)

Here, God teaches Yonah that as Creator, He has a bond with every one of his creations, no matter who they are. Every creation is a work of His hands. He taught Yonah that just like we have compassion and strong feelings for our possessions (some of them that we don't even work hard for!), God has compassion for all His creations. Therefore, in any given time, if man sincerely does Teshubah, he is accepted by God with open arms. This approach of God to all allows us to understand the attention God gives even to the most severe sinner among us, and we should be thankful for such a compassionate Creator.

An interesting story in *Massekhet Berakhot* (10a) captures the essence of this idea, and shows us the importance of us mimicking this important quality of our Creator:

There were once some highwaymen in the neighborhood of R. Meir who caused him a great deal of trouble. R. Meir accordingly prayed that they should die. His wife

Beruria said to him: How do you make out [that such a prayer should be permitted]? Because it is written “Let *hatta'im* (sinners) cease”? Is it written *hot'im* (sinners)? It is written *hatta'im* (i.e. sins, not sinners)! Further, look at the end of the verse: “and let the wicked men be no more.” *Since the sins will cease, there will be no more wicked men!* Rather, pray for them that they should repent, and there will be no more wicked. He did pray for them, and they repented.

As the Talmud states (*b. Shabbat* 133b): “Just as He is gracious and compassionate, you should also be gracious and compassionate.”

“With Trumpets and the Sound of the Horn, Blast Before Hashem Your King”

(בהצצרות וקול שופר הריעו לפני המלך ה')

Rabbi Victor Gheriani

In the Talmud (*b. Rosh Hashanah* 34a), there is a debate on the authentic sound of the תרועה. During the Roman exile, there were two prevalent traditions:

- 1) תרועה – (יליל) The sound of a woman crying (Middle Eastern “Leel” sound at the celebration of a wedding)
- 2) שברים – (גנה) The sound of a person sighing

Following the destruction of the Beit Hamiqdash, there was a crisis of preserving our religious traditions. Without the nationally accepted authority of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish nation lost guidance in the proper practice of the *misvot*. As a result, it was common to discover various practices of performing rituals in different communities. As the Rambam explains (*Hilkhos Shofar* 3:2):

תרועה זו האמורה בתורה נסתפק לנו בה ספק לפי אורך השנים ורוב הגליות ואין אנו יודעין היאך היא

“The ‘Teruah’ sound that is mentioned in the Torah, due to the passage of time and numerous exiles, we do not know how it sounds.”

R’ Abhu witnessed the communal differences of how to blow the Teruah on Rosh Hashanah. He understood that even the *misva* of blowing the shofar could serve as an instrument of fostering unity. Therefore, he ventured to introduce a **new** sound that would combine the two practices of the *Teru`ah* –

the *Shebarim/Teru`ah* (תשרת). As the Talmud states (Rosh Hashanah 34A):

אתקין רבי אבהו בקסרי: תקיעה, שלשה שברים, תרועה, תקיעה

“In the town of Cesarea, R Abhu instituted: Tekiah, three Shevarim, Teruah, and Tekiah”

R’ Abhu boldly declared that he would not tolerate religious division. The Jewish people had experienced the greatest tragedy of Jewish history – the destruction of Yerushalayim – the city of שלום. With the growing sects of Judaism and rise of baseless hatred (שנאת הנם), religious disharmony and discord was rampant.

By bridging the sounds of *Shebarim* and *Teru`ah*, he initiated a campaign to unite the people’s voices and introduce the importance of peace. He understood the underlying message of the Shofar.

On Rosh Hashanah, we declare that Hashem is our supreme authority and we, as his nation, are his trusted servants and beloved children. May the blowing of the Shofar remind us of our mission as one team to represent the world as a קדוש וגוי קדוש, ממלכת כהנים, “a kingdom of priests and a distinguished nation” (*Shemot* 19:6).

אשרי העם יודעי תרועה, ה' באור פניך יהלכון

“Happy is the people who know the joyful shout, Hashem, they walk in the light of your presence.” (*Tehillim* 89:16)

Rosh Hashanah: A Day of Joy and Happiness

David Khaski

As we approach the New Year, we begin the reciting of the *Selichot* in order to set us in the proper frame of mind. The tunes and prayers start to get us into the High Holiday mood. These prayers are based on the supplications of Yom Kippur, and focus on our need for forgiveness from Hashem. This focus is based on the Sages' opinion that Rosh Hashanah is the Day of Judgment (*b. Rosh Hash.* 8a), and thus everyone must correct their ways and ask forgiveness from Hashem in order to receive a merciful judgment.

This theme is continued in the piyyutim of Rosh Hashanah itself. We start with the poem *Ahot Qetanna* by R. Abraham Hazzan Girondi, which asks Hashem to save the poet's little sister. It sets the mood for the rest of the holiday: we are in trouble and we need Hashem to heed our prayers and save us. In another piyyut, *Eloqay Al Tedineni*, we ask that Hashem not judge us based on our misdeeds and transgressions. Also on Rosh Hashanah, we read the story of the *'aqeda*, where Abraham was willing to sacrifice all to Hashem. We want to remind Hashem of the greatness of Abraham who was willing to sacrifice all to serve Hashem, even what was most dear to him, and we ask Hashem to be merciful to us from the merit of that act.

The prayer service then continues with the blowing of the shofar. The Sages offer an interesting interpretation to the meaning of the *shofar*, one that still continues the theme of repentance and forgiveness. They compare the sound of the *shofar* to crying (*b. Rosh Hashanah* 33b). Some sages claim that the sounds must reflect wailing (a longer sound) and others believe it should sound like regular crying (a shorter sound). This becomes the source for the various sounds we

make with the *shofar* today: *shevarim* (longer) and *teru`ah* (shorter). Thus the *shofar* represents our crying out for forgiveness.

This is very different from the description of the *shofar* presented in the Torah. The *misvah* is introduced through the only name given to Rosh Hashanah in the Torah: *yom teru`ah* (day of trumpeting, or in another place, *yom zikhron teru`ah* – the day of remembering the trumpeting). The Torah does not elaborate further about what this means, but when discussing the creation of the silver trumpets (Num. 10:1-10), it states, “And on your joyous occasions – your fixed festivals and new moon days – you shall sound the trumpets over your burnt offerings and your sacrifices of well-being. They shall be a reminder of you before your Hashem...” (v. 10, NJPS). The trumpets here are blown on happy and joyous occasions, celebrating the good that we are enjoying, a very different theme than the one presented by the Amoraic Sages.

In the book of Nehemiah (ch. 8) we see a similar idea. Nehemiah is living in the newly resettled Jerusalem, after the destruction of the First Temple. The nation was for the most part ignorant of the laws of the Torah, but with their return to their homeland they are trying to correct their ways and return to Hashem’s path. It is the first day of the second month, and the people congregate to read from the Torah and learn what they are commanded to do. It is unclear what was read; some say that the section on blessings and curses was read to instill in the nation a fear of Hashem (*Ralbag*). Others claim that the section introducing Rosh Hashanah was read, and the leaders explained to the people that this was the Day of Judgment (*Malbim*). Still others explain that this could be any section of the Torah. As the leaders are reading from the Torah, the nation becomes depressed and begins to mourn over how far they have strayed from the way of the Torah, possibly reacting to what was being read. Nehemiah immediately cuts in to tell the nation that this day, is a day of joy and happiness. He instructs everyone to go home and celebrate

the holiday. He tells them to eat, drink, take care of the poor, and to cheer up. He ends his instructions with an unusual statement, “for your rejoicing in the Lord is the source of your strength” (v. 10, NJPS).

The *Hakhamim*, in their deep wisdom, were able to hint at the theme of repentance, while pointing out the happiness and joyousness of this day in the prayers of Rosh Hashanah. In the *amidah* prayer of *Musaph* (which is especially unique for Rosh Hashanah), we say three blessings that do not appear in any other prayer. The first identifies Hashem as the King of the world who rules and judges all beings. This leads to the second blessing, which describes Hashem as the one who knows and remembers all, and thus can judge with complete objectivity. However, we ask Hashem to remember and focus on our good deeds and those of our fathers, in order to receive favorable judgment, thus hinting at the idea of repentance without actually mentioning it. We end with the third blessing of this set which focuses on the *shofar*. The *shofar* plays a dual role in the blessing, the first as an instrument used to praise the Lord, and announce his approach like that of a king. The second role is to trumpet our salvation, which follows from the favorable judgment we asked for in the previous blessing. Thus the trumpeting is in fact a celebratory act, one that uplifts us, and inspired us.

Now we can understand the end of Nehemiah’s instruction. Though the nation has not been following the Torah, they now have the knowledge that will allow them to improve their ways. Therefore, there is no reason to be depressed, for this is all a process. Additionally, depression hinders a person from improving himself. Instead of working to change the situation, a depressed person just sits and mourns over his current situation. For a person to truly walk in Hashem’s path he must be happy. Even if he errs, he should not be saddened, for he can repent and return to Hashem. Furthermore, as the Sages explain, one of the goals of a Jew is to come to a deeper understanding of Hashem.

However, a depressed mind is closed off from knowledge, and cannot comprehend the deeper workings of the world (see *Ralbag*).

This explains the end of trumpets passage, “they shall be a reminder of you before your Hashem...” Hashem has chosen us as His nation, and has done wonders for us. We should celebrate what he gave us in order to show our appreciation for what we have. Thus, the trumpets call Hashem’s attention to the fact that we appreciate what He has done for us, and this will let him continue to judge us favorably in the coming year.

We are not in such a different position today than in Nehemiah’s time. We, too, want to improve ourselves and follow in Hashem’s path. Thus we should internalize his message for Rosh Hashanah: Eat, drink, and celebrate this great day that Hashem gave us. For only through happiness can one really come to understand Hashem and His Torah, and properly follow His path.

What is Rosh Hashanah All About?

Meyer Laniado

Every year during Elul, I ask myself the same question: What is Rosh Hashanah all about? The references to Rosh Hashanah in the Torah and the Mishnah are rare and vague. They seem to offer a variety of messages, and it is very difficult to pinpoint one unique theme that encompasses them all. However, while it is difficult to find commonality within the references in the Torah or Mishnah, there is a message that comes out from understanding each of these elements and how they each contribute towards the meaning of the holiday. Rosh Hashanah is precisely that one day a year when we should take a step back to gain perspective on our purpose in this world. It is the day where we can evaluate where our lives are headed. We can then decide if we want to take the time to understand what our purpose is, and if we want, choose to change our behavior to live a meaningful and fulfilled life. That is the message of Rosh Hashanah that each of these elements contributes to.

The Torah refers to the holiday in two ways, firstly as *zikhron teru'ah* (remembering the loud noise/outcry/trumpet call, *Vayiqra* 23:24), and secondly as *yom teru'ah* (a day of loud noise/outcry/trumpet call, *Bemidbar* 29:1). Looking to the Mishnah, we find two more articulations, one being, Rosh Hashanah³ (First of the Year) and the other *Yom HaDin*⁴ (Day of Judgement/Evaluation/Accounting). From all of the above references to the holiday of Rosh Hashanah, we have the famous four names: יום הַזְכָּרוֹן and יום הַתְּרוּעָה from the Torah, and יום הַדִּין and רֵאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה from the Mishnah. Thus, what is

³ Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:1

⁴ Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:2

the difference between these references and what is the message that the Torah is trying to portray to us?

Interestingly, none of the references for the holiday are truly unique to the holiday itself. תְּרוּעָה, used in both the Torah's references, is seen in a wide range of usages and by itself does not seem to indicate a special message for the holiday. תְּרוּעָה is found relating to other holidays⁵, the camp of Israel moving⁶, the announcement of the Jubilee⁷ year, war,⁸ and many others. Although, we may think of the שופר as something unique to Rosh Hashanah, it is not. It is the instrument mostly used to create a תְּרוּעָה⁹ and/or Teqiah¹⁰ in instances not unique to Rosh Hashanah as seen listed above. Similarly, יוֹם הַדִּין and רֵאשִׁית הַשָּׁנָה, the other two names for the holiday, mentioned in the Mishnah, are not unique to the holiday either¹¹. However, while the references to the holiday are not unique to just Rosh Hashanah, each of the individual names identifies a particular aspect of the holiday.

The name יוֹם הַדִּין, the Day of Judgment, denotes the evaluation and consideration of evidence, such as the evaluation of our current actions and behaviors. We need to assess whether our actions are aligned with our vision. In order to do this, we need to know where it is we are supposed to be heading. As the saying goes “if you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there.”

Our purpose, where we should be headed in life, is referenced with the holiday identification of יוֹם הַזְכָּרוֹן. יוֹם הַזְכָּרוֹן, The Day of Remembering, is the day that God “remembers”¹².

⁵ Bemidbar 10:10

⁶ Bemidbar 10:1-9

⁷ Vayiqra 25:9

⁸ Bemidbar 31:6

⁹ Vayiqra 25:9

¹⁰ Sifre Bemidbar 10 defines בְּהַצֵּץ צֶרֶחַ as שופר

¹¹ Rosh Hashanah for: 1. Kings and Festivals; 2. Animal Tithes; 3. Years, Sabbatical, Jubilee; 4. Trees

Judgement Days: 1. Grains; 2. Fruits; 3. People; 4. Water

¹² Rashi: *Aqedat Yishaq*; Rashbam: *Yisrael* (Har Sinai)

the ברית he made with us. As a Jew our purpose is in fulfillment of the ברית¹³ (agreement/contract), for us to be his people and for Him to be our God¹⁴, specifically our unique role as מְמַלְכֵת כֹּהֲנִים וגוי קְדוֹשׁ (ministers/priests, *Shemot* 19:6). יום זְכוּרוֹן reminds us of the ברית and our responsibilities as such. Fulfilling the ברית is our vision, and our purpose in life.

Through our acknowledgement of the ברית and our active role as God's ministers, God is enthroned as our king. Thus it is obvious that by following God's *misvot*, we set him up as our leader and ourselves as his people. The name of Rosh Hashanah, יוֹם הַתְּרוּעָה, signifies this enthroning, the announcement of God's presence, and our praise of God¹⁵. יוֹם הַתְּרוּעָה also signifies a call to do teshubah and return to the right path.¹⁶

Rosh Hashanah is the beginning of a new year, it is that time of year where we have the opportunity to evaluate our actions, and revisit our mission and purpose, with the goal of realigning our actions with our vision. Well-run companies make sure to set aside time every year to reread their vision statement and evaluate whether or not they are on the right track. As a nation, and as individuals, we have the same opportunity to evaluate whether or not our daily actions are taking us closer towards our purpose in life, and if not, this is our opportunity to return back to the right path.

Rosh Hashanah is also our chance to break our bad patterns of behavior and change our outcome for the year. It is the day of judgment in which we are judged on this single day for all of the actions we have committed all year. Yet, how can we be judged for all of our actions on one single

¹³ *Shemot* 19:5-6.

¹⁴ *Beresheit* 17:7, *Debarim* 26:17 as well as references to "אני יקוק אלוהיכם" such as is *Vayiqra* 19.

¹⁵ *Tehillim* 47:6-7; 98:6, *Shemot* 19:19, *Dibre Hayamim* 1 15:28 (the Aron signifies God's presence), 1 *Melakhim* 1:34

¹⁶ *Yesh`aya* 58.

day? ¹⁷ The answer as I see it is simple, once we are in a cycle, a pattern of behavior, it is very hard to change our ways and we will continue on the same path. Thus, the assumption is that we will continue to do the same, good and bad, that we are doing today for the year to come.

Now is our chance to evaluate our lives and see if we have chosen the path of life,¹⁸ and if not, to realign our actions. The *misvot* were given to us to steer us towards living a viable, sustainable, productive and purposeful life. We need to make sure that we don't get caught up in activities that are counterproductive and self-destructive. The way to take control of our lives, and live a life of meaning and purpose, is to first take an account of our current actions, Yom Hadin, and then gain perspective of our purpose, Yom Hazikaron and Yom Teruah. When better to do this than on Rosh Hashanah?

The question we need to ask ourselves on these days is where will our life take us with our current choices and what choices can we make to create the outcome we really want. How can we be sure to have a life engaged directly with existence and reality? Rosh Hashanah allows us to do this by reflecting on our purpose, our vision as a Jewish nation and as individuals. Our vision as a Jewish nation is to be a “kingdom of priests and a distinguished nation,” through following God's instructions¹⁹. This vision should guide our daily lives and actions. Now is our chance to start afresh, and have a Rosh Hashanah, a new year, one in which we live a life of purpose and meaning.

¹⁷ Rosh Hashanah 8a, “Meresheit Hashanah” etc.

¹⁸ *Debarim* 30:15-20

¹⁹ *Shemot* 19:5-6

Striving for True Teshubah

Victor Mosseri

We are currently in the time period of *Aseret Yeme Teshubah*, the days when Hashem is ever so close to us and awaits our return to Him. The *hakhamim* tell us that it is on these days that we have an opportune time to repent for our sins, as the verse states, “Seek God when He can be found” (*Yeshu`yah* 55:6). Various statements of our *hakhamim* point to the greatness of *teshubah*:

“Great is repentance, for through it, even the purposeful sins are transformed into merits” (*b. Yoma* 81a).

“Great is repentance, for it cancels man’s divine decree” (*b. Rosh Hashanah* 17).

“The gates of prayer are sometimes open and sometimes closed, but the gates of repentance are always open” (*Debarim Rabbah* 2).

“One who repents is considered to be like one who ascended Jerusalem, built the *Bet Hamiqdash*, erected the altar, and offered the sacrifices specified in the Torah” (*Vayiqra Rabbah* 7).

The list goes on and on. The Rambam (Rabbenu Moshe ben Maimon) in *Hilkhot Teshubah* says that yesterday, before he made *teshubah*, the sinner was considered despicable before Hashem and today, after he has done *teshubah*, he is “beloved, precious, close to Hashem, a friend.” The question is, how could it be that this man who was once sinning like there was no end is now, just a moment after his *teshubah*, “beloved, precious, close to Hashem, a friend”? How could it be that “In the place where *ba`ale teshubah* stand, even the completely righteous can not stand?” (*b. Berakhot* 34a). These statements are very disturbing and hard to understand.

It could very well be that the *hakhamim* praise the repentant to such a degree because of the difficulty of attaining true repentance. In the *hakhamim*'s eyes, one who truly repents is worthy of such praise because of the difficult task that he has overcome. *Teshubah* means that the sinner regrets what he did, confesses his sin and – here's the hard part – NEVER does it again. The sinner who no longer commits this sin is not the same person that he once was. He has transformed into a completely new person. The Rambam says that it is preferred that the repentant change his name, and move to a new place to help him feel that is actually somebody else. One who sins, repents and reverts back to his sin has shown that he is not a new person but is rather the same person he always was. It's true: He tried to change. But he has not done much. Only the one who makes a lifelong commitment to never repeat his sin and sticks to his word has attained true repentance. It is for this reason that the *hakhamim* give much credit to the one who repents and consider him on the highest of levels.

But the question is obvious: How can we actually tell God that we will never repeat this transgression again? Are we angels that we can say such a thing? Who are we that we can make such bold statements and have so much confidence in ourselves? The evil inclination is way too strong. After all, "And all the thoughts of his heart are only evil all of the day" (*Bereshit* 6:5). With that said, how are we to ever attain true repentance?

Every year on the Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah we read *Perashat Nissabim*. In this *perasha*, Moshe discusses the *pesuqim* dealing with *Teshubah*. Just a couple of *pesuqim* after Moshe's discussion on *teshubah*, it is written "Hashem, your God, will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring to love Hashem, your God, with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live" (*Devarim* 30:6). The *pasuq* is a bit strange. It seems to negate the fact that we have free will. Why is God circumcising out hearts that we should

love him? The Ramban (Rabbenu Moshe Ben Nahman) says that the *pasuq* is referring to the Divine assistance that is sent for one who has come to do *teshubah*. As it says in *Masekhet Shabbat* 104a, “He who comes to purify himself, [God] will assist him.” I believe that the Ramban has helped us answer our question. It is true that on our own, it would be nearly impossible to refrain from committing a certain sin again. However, the Torah tells us, that if we are sincere and strongly desire to never do this sin again, Hashem will send his Divine assistance and will “circumcise our hearts” so that we will have the ability to defeat our evil inclination. With this Divine assistance, true *teshubah* can and will be attained.

Let’s take this opportunity during these ten days of repentance, when Hashem’s Divine assistance is at its peak, to sincerely make *teshubah* for all of our sins. We must regret, confess, pray and hope never to do these sins again and Hashem will then send forth his assistance and circumcise our hearts so that we will have attained true repentance. May we all have the privilege of having our hearts circumcised to love Hashem and reconnect with Him.

Tizqu Leshanim Rabbot!

The Paradox of Justice and Mercy

Eddie Rahmey

Rosh Hashanah is the conception of the Jewish year. All events that play itself out over the span of a year, can be traced back to find its roots on Rosh Hashanah. Rosh Hashanah plants the seeds for all that will take place over the next 12 months. Just as the head is the center of control for the rest of the body, all actions and speech originate in thought and mind, so to Rosh Hashanah acts as the origin of what will take place in the future. That is why we are judged on Rosh Hashanah for the entire year. While the year is still being formed, we have the ability to manipulate our character and set the tone for the rest of the year. But once the day has passed and our “genes” have been coded it will take excruciating surgery to make one minor change.

The *gemarah* in *Massekhet Rosh Hashanah* has a dispute between two sages when the world was created. Rabbi Eliezer said, “The world was created in *Tishri*, while Rabbi Yehoshua said, “The world was created in *Nissan*.” (Rosh Hashna 10B). Even though this seems like a fundamental dispute, *Tosaphot* offers a resolution by saying “both views are the word of God, in *Tishri* it occurred to God to create the world and in *Nissan* He actually created it.” *Rashi* on the first *Pasuk* of the Torah says “**Elokim Created**: It does not say Hashem (YKVK) created, because at first it came up in thought that Hashem should create the world only with the attribute of justice, but when He saw the world could not exist, He gave priority to the trait of mercy and joined it with justice.” What they seem to be saying is that first Hashem created the world in thought and then six months later the actual construction of the world took place. That is why Hashem placed Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, which are the times of judgment, together in the month of *Tishri*. Then

in *Nissan*, which is a time of Hashem's mercy, we were taken out of Egypt, which was when the world was created.

A puzzling point to this *Rashi* is, how could he say that God joined together the trait of mercy to strict justice. Once even a drop of mercy is added to *din* (strict justice), then it is no longer justice. The very definition of justice is that there is no mercy involved. Correctly, *Rashi* should have said that Hashem replaced the attribute justice with that of mercy. The answer is that Hashem built within creation a paradox where strict justice and mercy can coexist simultaneously. Hashem in His mercy created a concept called *Teshubah*, repentance that gives a person a renewed opportunity to return to Hashem and follow the *Misvot*. As long as we live in this world we are given the chance to change our ways and Hashem will forgive our past sins. But once a person steps into the next world they will be held responsible for every wrong action where they should have known better and Hashem will be using the trait of strict justice. So let's use our time wisely and spend it contemplating our past deeds and accept upon ourselves a better future before it's too late.

It is interesting to note it was Rabbi Eliezer who held of the opinion that the world was created in *Tishri*, the time of strict justice. Justice is the viewpoint of *Bet Shammai*, which is a theoretical ideal, but very rarely does it work in actuality. In contrast, Rabbi Yehoshua represents the trait of mercy, by claiming that the world was created in *Nissan*. Rather than taking on an idealist approach, Rabbi Yehoshua takes the realistic one, by stating the creation of the world is defined by its physical manifestation and not by the creation of its blueprints.

Jewish tradition teaches us that the names of people and objects indicate their true essence. It can be suggested that the names of Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Eliezer can reflect their worldviews as indicated by their opinions to when the world was created. Yehoshua comes from the word *moshi`a*, which means savior. The name Eliezer comes from the word *`ezer*,

which means helper. The difference is that a helper only assists a friend, one party makes some effort and a friend comes and helps him out; as opposed to a savior is a person that completes the task completely for their friend. During the month of *Nissan*, the Jews didn't put any effort into being redeemed from Egypt or at the splitting of the sea. Hashem completely saved us even though we didn't deserve it, expressing His mercy to us, thus the opinion of Rabbi Yehoshua, that the world was created in *Nissan*. Rabbi Eliezer claims the world was created in *Tishri*, when the attribute of strict justice is prevalent and it is up to every individual to take some action to save themselves and change their ways and Hashem will only act as the *`ezer*, to assist us. Once a person makes the effort to start helping himself by creating an awakening from below, Hashem will take him the rest of the way.

“Great is *Teshubah*, For it Turns Sins to Merits”

Alex Schindler

The possibility and *misva* of *teshubah* is a fundamental principle of Judaism. *Teshubah*, forward motion toward the right and the good, allows the individual, the nation, and the world to achieve the goals set for us by God in the Torah. The Talmud waxes poetic about the virtues of true repentance, even as it teaches us how to go about achieving it. In *Masekhet Yoma* (86b) there is a claim, however, which seems strange on the surface. “Great is *teshubah*,” says R. Laqish, “for it converts (intentional) sins into merits.” The Gemara continues to clarify that this is the case only for *teshubah* “from love (of Hashem),” rather than “from fear.”

Why should intentional sins be converted into merits? Is God a teacher of young children, moving gold stars from one column of the “mitzvah chart” to another, on the basis of which He decides how to punish and reward us? Or can we develop a sophisticated, more grown-up understanding of *misvot*, *teshubah*, and rewards? We must demystify this Jewish principle and understand what R. Laqish is saying in order to comprehend what *teshubah* really is. This is especially crucial before and during the Days of Awe.

Our understanding of *teshubah*, reward and punishment, must follow from what the Torah tells us about the *misvot* as well as the understanding of HaZa”L. The Torah tells us in the book of *Debarim*, “And you shall do that which is good and just in the eyes of Hashem, *that it should go well for you*” (Deut. 6:18). There are many, many similar statements, especially in *Debarim*, informing us that Hashem’s commands are given for our own benefit (see, for example, Deut. 10:12, *letob lakh*, “for your own good”). In a sense, a *misva* is its own reward, for it improves the individual. A nationwide observance of *misvot* is an even greater reward,

for it creates a just society in which ethical behavior is the norm, and even society's downtrodden are taken care of.

Recognizing the inherent benefits of *misvot* gives meaning to Ben Azzai's statement in *Pirke Abot* 4:2, "The *sakhar* of a *misva*, is a *misva*, and the *sakhar* of an *`abera*, is an *`abera*". A sinner lives a life of sin, which is already a life of punishment. His life has no meaning, and he will see no justice, no charity, and no peace. And a society of sinners destroys itself, self-destructing and fading into the dustbin of history.

On the other hand, every *misva* serves to improve a person's character, and in this way, a man or woman who performs God's commandments will eventually come to perform them more easily, more consistently, all the while perfecting his or her personality. The home and society built by observance of *misvot* is one which, over time, can redeem the entire world—as the Gemara in *Yoma* says in the same context, "Ribbi Meir would say, 'Great is *teshubah*, for on account of the repentance of one person the entire world's sins are forgiven'".

Now we must understand the nature of *teshubah*, and of *ahabah*, before the concept of *teshubah* from *ahabah* can become accessible to us. Maimonides, the greatest of Sephardic sages, defines *teshubah* in the following terms:

What is complete *teshubah*? It is when it is possible to commit the same sin, but he leaves and does not commit the sin because of his return to God—not out of fear or weakness (weakness preventing him from committing the sin). How is this done? Here, a man that sinned with a woman, and after some time was alone with her, still in love with her, and still strong of body, and in the same place that he had sinned with her, yet he left and did not sin with her this time – he is a *ba`al teshubah gemurah*. (Rambam, *Hilkhot Teshubah* 2:1)

This *ba'al teshubah*, as we know from the Talmud and all of Jewish thought, stands in a place “Where even men who never sinned can not stand.”

We see from the example (and the other *Hilkhot Teshubah*, which make this explicit) that *teshubah* consists not only of regretting and verbally articulating the sin, but successfully showing, “such that God Almighty would stand as one’s Witness,” that one has resolved not to stray again. But why should doing this “from love” turn intentional sins into merits?

Maimonides, in the *Mishneh Torah*, explains where true *Ahabat Hashem* comes from:

What is the path to Love of God, and Fear of God? At the moment that Man looks at God’s works, and in his sight of the great wonders, as he sees in them God’s wisdom that has no measure and no end—immediately, he loves and praises and extols and desires a great desire to know God. And when he contemplates these things, he immediately fears and realizes that he is but a small, humble creation, standing with his small mind in front of the Omniscient. (*Hilkhot Yesode HaTorah* 2:2)

In other words, great awe of God’s works (and Maimonides goes on to describe that this awe is achieved principally through study of the natural sciences) leads directly to love of God, followed then by fear because of one’s insignificance next to the Almighty. This love is the *ahabah* the Hakhamim referred to. When a person loves Hashem out of awe, they immediately want to do everything God commands, and *teshubah* follows naturally. They regret not just individual sins, but any part of their lifestyle which is not conducive to a life of *misvot*. They are drawn to erase any memory of what used to be their sinful ways. In effect, and this is the key to understanding *teshubah*, they are reborn.

This is how we can understand Maimonides’ description of actions undertaken by someone doing *teshubah*.

It is among the ways of *teshubah* for the penitent to cry out frequently to God, in sorrow and in plea, and to give charity according to his means, and to distance himself very far from that which caused him to sin. And *to change his name, which is to say, 'I am someone else, and no longer that man who did those things'*, and to change his deeds entirely for good, and that which is right. (*Hilkhot Teshubah 2:4*)

How many people do you know who changed their names on Yom Kippur? Not many, certainly, but here Maimonides reveals a great secret of *teshubah*. A name change signifies a drastic change of one's identity, or how one is known. In other words, when Maimonides discusses changing one's name, one's reputation, he is talking about rebirth. The *Ahabat Hashem* which motivates regret and repentance, and an all-out lifestyle change, does not merely wipe one's slate clean. It transforms the penitent into an entirely new person!

What we have said allows us to understand the notion of intentional sins becoming merits. The repentant person we have just described is stronger for his or her experiences. In effect, every single action leading up to the turning point in his or her life, has gone into making a true *ba'al teshubah*, which is a very special sort of *saddiq*: one with the wisdom of experience, who has tasted sin and given it up for love of God. How would this person have fulfilled not only the *misvah* of *teshubah*, but a complete rebirth, without being brought to where they were by all their deeds, good and bad? By doing *teshubah*, and in effect becoming a new person, shedding the useless skin of sin, the penitent has made his sinful past valuable, harnessing it toward his *`abodat Hashem*. That is how sins, even those committed with the most malicious intent, can become merits through *teshubah* from *ahabah*.

“What’s Love Got to Do With It”

David Tawil

Imagine you were asked to put together a book that captures the essence of the High Holidays, and in particular the day of *Yom Kippur*. For most of us the book would begin with a profound message about repenting for our sins, doing *Teshubah* by correcting our ways, or coming closer to God in general. Yet, when we open *Massekhet Yoma*, the tractate which deals with all things *Yom Kippur*, we don’t see that at all. The beginning of the *Massekhet* deals with the issues pertaining to the *Kohen Gadol*, specifically removing him from his home and giving him a second wife in preparation for the holy work to be done on this day. The Gemara goes through painstaking detail in talking about this “backup wife” which we assign to the *Kohen Gadol*. The Torah tells us that the *Kohen* must first repent for “himself and his house (referring to his wife)” (“וכפר בעדו ובעד ביתו”) before he can ask for forgiveness on behalf of the nation of Israel. Therefore, the Rabbis were afraid that perhaps his wife will die before he can perform the work of the day, and the *kohen* will not have a wife for which to repent! Thus we set up a backup wife in case this should happen.

This entire exchange is quite puzzling: We must first understand why there is a requirement for the *kohen* to be married in the first place? Furthermore, why do the Rabbis go to such great lengths to ensure the presence of a wife for the *kohen*? When we look at the Halakha we see emphasis placed on this even today; The רמ"א writes in א' סעיף א' that it is proper to find a Hazzan who is married, to represent the Congregation on the High Holidays. Why must the Hazzan be married?

We can answer these questions by looking at the Rambam in *Hilkhot Teshubah*. The Rambam writes in the tenth chapter of these laws, about the idea of worshipping God out of love.

To better understand this extremely high level of worship, Rambam compares one's love for God to the love he has for a woman. He states:

What is the proper way to love God? That is to love God with a strong and great love, so that his soul is tied to loving God and following after Him always. It is like being love sick to the point that one can't stop thinking about a certain woman; Whether sitting or standing, eating or drinking, in her presence or away from her, he is constantly tied to her. This is what King Solomon referred to when he said in *Shir Hashirim* (2:5): כִּי חוֹלֵת אֶהְבֶּה אֲנִי, 'For I am love sick.' (*Hilkhot Teshubah* 10:3)

Rambam is teaching us that although one can love God without having experienced this type of connection, those who have experienced this relationship with another human being, can better understand how to reach this relationship with God. For that reason we want the holiest man in the Jewish nation, the *Kohen Gadol*, to represent us through his love of God and to get our sins changed into merits. As the Gemara states, "Anyone who does Teshubah out of fear, his sins are wiped away. Anyone who does Teshubah out of love, his sins are turned into merits." This is what we want both from our *Kohen Gadol* and nowadays from the Hazzan that represents us. With God's help we should all have our sins turn into merits, and gain a love for God in this world as we have with other relationships in our lives.