

Parashat Vayelech-Shabbat Shuvah 5783, 2022:

“*U’Teshuvah u’Tefilah u’Tzakah Ma’avirin et Roah Hagezerah*”

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yeziel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The *Netaneh Tokef* prayer is one of the most emotionally expressive *tefilot* in the *Nusach Ashkenaz* and *Nusach Sefard machzorim*, so much so that one of its passages brings many of us to tears each time it is recited:

On Rosh Hashanah it [that is, our judgment] will be inscribed, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed—how many shall pass away and how many shall be born, who shall live and who shall die, who in good time, and who by an untimely death, who by water and who by fire, who by sword and who by wild beast, who by famine and who by thirst, who by earthquake and who by plague, who by strangulation and who by stoning, who shall have rest and who wander, who shall be at peace and who pursued, who shall be serene and who tormented, who shall become impoverished and who wealthy, who shall be debased, and who exalted. (Translation, [www.Sefaria.org](http://www.Sefaria.org) with my emendations)

Following the *chazan*’s repetition of this section, the entire congregation cries aloud: “*u’teshuvah u’tefilah u’tzakah ma’avirin et roah hagezerah*—but repentance, prayer and charity remove the evil of the decree!” (Translation, ArtScroll Machzor) This is an incredibly powerful affirmation of the transformative nature of *teshuvah*, *tefilah* and *tzedakah* when they are combined into one spiritual unit, for, then, even a negative decree against us, as individuals and as a nation, can be nullified.

In *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 2:4*, the Rambam (1135-1204) renders a *p’sak* (halachic conclusion) that is congruent with the phrase, “*u’teshuvah u’tefilah u’tzakah ma’avirin et roah*

*hagezerah*”: “Among the paths of repentance is for the penitent to constantly call out before G-d, crying and entreating, and to perform charity according to his potential...” (Translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger) My *rebbe* and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, examines this statement in a deeply penetrating manner. In so doing, he elucidates the meaning of “to constantly call out before G-d, crying and entreating”:

Herein it is explained that there is a special kind of *tefilah* to be undertaken by the *ba'al teshuvah*, namely, *tefilah shel tza'akah*—prayer of crying out [from the depths of one's being], and the unique category of this form of prayer appears to be none other than the *selichot* (penitential prayers), which are, [by definition,] *tefilah shel tza'akah*, rather than standard prayer. As such, we are accustomed to say the *selichot* aloud, as this is a part of the fulfillment of the crying out of the *ba'al teshuvah*.

Following this, the Rav analyzes the phrase, “to perform charity according to his potential”:

It appears to me that this is the very reason why the *parsha* concerning the *Mishkan* (Portable Desert Sanctuary) appears immediately after the *parsha* of the *Chet HaEgel* (Sin of the Golden Calf), since it is one of the paths of *teshuvah* [for the *ba'al teshuvah*] to give *tzedakah*. [As such,] the voluntary offerings that went toward the work of [constructing] the *Mishkan* were in the category of *tzedakah* to bring about *kapparah* (expiation) upon their souls. (*Sefer Hareirei Kedem*, vol. 1, page 76, translations and brackets my own)

These insights provide a trenchant interpretation of the relationship of *teshuvah* to *tefilah* and *tzedakah*. *Tefilah* of *teshuvah* is given voice in the *selichot*, which are the ultimate representation of *tefilah shel tza'akah*. *Tzedakah* of *teshuvah* engenders *kapparah al nafshoteinu*, expiation for our very being.

With Hashem's help, may our heartfelt *teshuvah*, *tefilah shel teshuvah*, and *tzedakah shel teshuvah* unite to remove the *roah hagezerah* from upon us, so that we may be inscribed in the *Sefer HaChaim* (the Book of Life). *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom v'Gamar Chatimah Tovah

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Please contact me at [rdbe718@gmail.com](mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com) to be added to my weekly email list.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at:

<http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav](#)