

Rosh HaShanah, 5784, 2023:

Av HaRachamim and Teshuvah

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon HaKohane, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheil, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Gittel Malka bat Moshe, Alexander Leib ben Benyamin Yosef, 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.

This is the time of year when our friends ask: “How are you? Are you ready for another Rosh HaShanah? Can you believe its Rosh HaShanah again?” These, and similar kinds of questions are “on the mark,” and exactly where our thoughts should be. In truth, “How are you?” can be taken either as another blasé social pleasantry—or something far more. In my estimation, we can view it as a modern-day restatement of Hashem’s question to Adam after he violated the one *mitzvah* that Hashem gave him, namely, the prohibition of eating from the *pri eitz hada’at* (Tree of Knowledge): “And the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to the eyes, and the tree was desirable to make one wise; so she took of its fruit, and she ate, and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 3:6, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) This, in turn, led the Almighty to ask: “Where are you?” (3:9) An odd question by all accounts, since Hashem knew full well where Adam and Chava were located, as such, what was the Holy One Blessed be He really asking?

I believe Hashem was asking an existential question, or perhaps, the existential question: “Now that you have sinned against Me, what is your place within the great scheme of Creation? What is your value to the world now that you have torn our covenant asunder?” In short, Hashem was asking some of the very same things we should be asking ourselves in preparation for Rosh

HaShanah.

These types of questions should motivate us to pause and reflect upon our past actions and spur us on to depth-level change. Moreover, they should lead to the logical conclusion that it is time to do *teshuvah*. The Rambam (1135-1204) defines *teshuvah* in this manner:

What exactly is *teshuvah*? [It is the act that demands] the sinner to reject his sin, remove it from his thoughts, and determine in his mind that he will never do it again...So, too, he must feel badly for what he has done in the past...and he must bear testimony to He who knows all secret matters that he will never repeat this sin again... In addition, he must verbally confess [his sin] and speak aloud of those things he has determined in his mind. (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 2:2*)

In sum, the *teshuvah* process is comprised of:

1. Rejection of the sin: takes place in the present (*azivat hacheit*).
2. Feeling badly about what has been done: refers to past actions (*charata al ha'avar*).
3. Resolving to change: refers to the future (*kabbalah al he'atid*).
4. Confessing (verbally) to Hashem to never be involved in this sin again (*vidui devarim*).

Authentic *teshuvah*, therefore, is a holistic process that involves the individual's entire being. It incorporates a radical shift in the mindset of one who has gone astray so that they will be able to return to the proper path of Torah observance. It requires unflinching honesty and the will to reject rationalizations for our sins. In addition, the *ba'al teshuvah* (master of *teshuvah*) needs to feel badly about what he or she has done, reject their prior action, and resolve never to repeat this deed in the future. Lastly, all of this must be accompanied by a heart-felt oral confession before Hashem of what they have done.

It stands to reason that the more pronounced a particular sin has become within a person's repertoire of behaviors, the greater degree of difficulty they will encounter in trying to free themselves from its powerful grip. This is why *tefilat tachanun* that we recite on Mondays and

Thursdays contains the hopeful phrase: “*hapoteiach yad b'teshuvah l'kabale poshayim v'chataim*—You Who opens a hand for repentance, to welcome rebels and sinners...” (Translation, *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur*, page 130) In other words, *Avinu Malkeinu* is at one and the same time, *Av HaRachamim*, and stands ready to receive our heartfelt *teshuvah*, in love and divine mercy. Perhaps, most of all, we are not alone in this endeavor, as Yirmiyahu the prophet declared so long ago: “*Hashiveinu Hashem alecha v'nashuvah, chadeish yameinu k'kedem*—Enable us Hashem to return in *teshuvah unto You*, and we will return, renew our days [with You] as they were in earlier times.” (*Megillat Eicah* 5:21, translation, my own) May this time come soon, and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Kativah v'chatimah tovah and Shabbat Shalom

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*** 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](#)