

gets used to a certain way of life, and he might think that this is who he is, and it doesn't matter whether he acquired it for himself or received it from the society in which he lives. But if his friend is the head, or yesterday was the head, and he just followed along – if a person does things because others do, or because he did them yesterday – then he is a tail.

The *Chasam Sofer* writes about the *Chassidim* who had a *minhag* to wear only silk garments and not wool that even though they did so in the first generation because they were concerned about *shaatnez*, in the second generation they did it only because they inherited the custom. The first generation was the head and the second generation was already a tail. If a person doesn't do what he does because it is his own *avodah* in the here and now, it is not "head" but "tail".

"Head" means a person lives with spiritual aspirations. He is a creator and a builder. He is building

himself. He is constantly working on changing and improving himself. He wants to be a bigger *masmid*, to *daven* with better *kavanah*, and so forth.

A person can learn entire *sedarim* with *hasmadah*, but do it because he is falling in line with the atmosphere around him, without any personal aspirations, without a sense of direction in building himself spiritually.

On Rosh Hashanah, which is the day of "head," *rosh*, a person is granted special *siyata d'Shamaya* to become a head. Not to just fall in line after other heads. On the one hand, one should be a "tail to lions," which means to follow the lead of the *Gedolei Torah v'Mussar*. To take advantage of the heads who maintain his *yeshivah* and the framework he is in.

But at the same time, a person needs to be an entity on his own. He needs to conquer on his own some *midah* or another, and thereby revolutionize himself, and then he will be a head, not a tail. ●



The Best is for Hashem

וְלָקַחְתָּ מִרְאשֵׁית כָּל פְּרֵי הָאֲדָמָה. (דברים כו, ב)

You shall take from the first of all the fruit of the soil. (*Devarim* 26:2)

The *parshah* begins with the *mitzvah* of bringing *bikurim*, the first fruits of the land. When *Beis Hamikdash* stood, we would bring to the *kohen* who was there the first fruits that grew in our gardens and orchards. We would bring them up to *Yerushalayim* in beautifully decorated baskets, accompanied by great crowds, in great joy, to the sound of musical instruments.

We don't have the *mitzvah* of *bikurim* today, but the underlying idea of this *mitzvah* applies nowadays as well.

People usually have special affection for their first produce. Let's say you are a farmer in *Eretz Yisrael*. You waited for this a whole year, you worked your field the whole hard winter, and you can't wait for the spring when you will see the reward of your



efforts. When you go out to the field and finally see the first of the crop, you are delighted, and you want to bring it home for you and your family to enjoy.

But the Torah says that the first and the most precious is *Hashem's* portion. We need to remember the origin of the blessings that we have. *Hashem* gives us the fruits of the land with so much grace and love. If we look at a fruit basket in our home we will see how each fruit has a different shape and color and taste. A basket like this is so full of *Hashem's* love for us! הֲזֵן אֶת הָעוֹלָם בְּחֵן בְּחָסֵד וּבְרַחֲמִים. We should reciprocate that love.

We should fulfill the idea behind the *mitzvah* of *bikkurim* in all the *mitzvos* we do. So writes the Rambam:

Everything that is for the beneficent G-d should be from that which is beautiful and good. If we build a house of prayer, it should be more beautiful than the house

we live in. If we feed the hungry, we should give him the best and sweetest on our table. If we clothe the naked, we should put on him the best of our clothing. If we sanctify an item, it should be from the best we have. And so it says, "All the fat is for *Hashem*!"^{1,2}

Let's say they knock on your door and ask if you have some item that you can donate for *bachmasas kallah*. Instead of rummaging around for some old thing that you received as a gift from some aunt, and you don't know what to do with it, and you are happy to get rid of it, you should instead look for something nice to donate, as the Rambam said.

Everything that is for *Hashem* should be from the best. ●

1 *Vayikra* 3:16.

2 *Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Issurei Mizbeach* 7:11

PARSHAH TOPIC

Return, O Maiden of Yisrael

Wipe the Slate Clean

The zodiacal sign for the month of Elul is בתולה, "the maiden," known in English as Virgo. The Ramban explains that this signifies *Hashem's* love for *Kenesses Yisrael*.¹

It seems to bear another meaning as well. We know that a sinner is likened to a wife who was unfaithful to her husband. And *Halachah* states that a wife who commits adultery is forbidden to her husband. If so, how can *K'lal Yisrael* do *teshuvah*, after they betrayed *Hashem*?

1 Cited in *Chochmah u'Mussar* 1:85.

The power of *teshuvah* creates a reality in which *Hashem* calls out to the Jewish people:

שׁוּבִי בְּתוּלַת יִשְׂרָאֵל – Return, O maiden of Yisrael!²

Hashem calls the Jewish people a "maiden," i.e., a virgin girl. It is as if they never sinned at all.

The deeper meaning of this is brought out by Rabbeinu Yonah's teaching in *Yesod HaTeshuvah*:

On the day [that a person does *teshuvah*], he should cast away all the sins he did, and make himself as if he was born that day, and he has neither merits

2 *Yirmeyahu* 31:20.

nor demerits. This day is the beginning of his deeds.

Teshuvah does not only mean that a person has no sins. Rather it means, as Rabbeinu Yonah said, that “he has neither merits nor demerits.” It is turning over a new leaf, with no *chovos* and no *zechuyos*.

The Rambam writes:

Among the ways of *teshuvah* is that... he changes his name, to say: I am someone else. I am not the person who did those deeds.³

Even a married woman who never sinned, who conducted her whole life in *kedushah* and *taharah*, is not called a *besulah*. But *teshuvah* means “as if he was born that day,” like a *besulah* who is entering her initial relationship with her husband. Whatever took place in the past, for better or for worse, is as if it never existed. Everything starts anew!

This is the *avodah* of the month of Elul.

The Close and the Far

The Prophet Yeshayahu declares:

שָׁמְעוּ רְחוּקִים אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי וְדַעוּ קְרוּבִים
גְּבֻרָתִי – Those who are far, hear what I did.
And those who are close, know My power.⁴

Rashi explains that “those who are far” refers to people who believe in *Hashem* and have been doing His will since their youth. And “those who are close” refers people who did *teshuvah* and recently drew close to *Hashem*.

Rashi is expressing a startlingly original idea. Simply speaking, we would consider those who fulfilled *Hashem's* will since their youth as closer to *Hashem* than those who drew close to Him only now. However, Rashi says it the other way around. This is because there is an inherent drawback in the habitual behavior of people who have been doing *Hashem's* will since their youth, and for this reason they are termed “those who are far.”

We will explain.

This issue was central to *avodas Hashem* as taught in the yeshivah of Kelm. R. Simcha Zissel Ziv, *Alter* of Kelm, asked why we tend not to be moved and excited by the things to which we were educated in childhood – such as that G-d created the world and runs it, or the story of *Yetzias Mitzrayim* and *Krias Yam Suf* – though in fact these are exceedingly wondrous matters.

The *Alter* answers that it is because we first heard these things in our childhood when our intellect was weak and undeveloped. Therefore, the knowledge and understanding we attained of them was that of a “feeble mind.” This feeble understanding then became a part of us. As a result, we go through our whole life with this kind of perception.

The first time a person learns בראשית ברא אלקים, “In the beginning, G-d created,” he is five years old. The next year he learns it again, and he does not see it as new. He already knows it. Thus he relates the knowledge he is now gaining to what he learned last year. The same is true when he is ten. He learns it another time, and again he does not see in it something new. He already knew it when he was five! And so it is at the age of twenty and forty. A person relates the knowledge he is now gaining to what he knew when he was five years old.

If a person would be created fully developed with an adult mind, as was *Adam HaRishon*, he would be so excited and moved by these things that he would not be able to contain himself.

If someone would come and take a simple piece of paper, fashion it into a plane with six wings, and then pull the tail, and the plane and all the wings would move, we would all be totally amazed. What a wonder! Yet when a person walks out the door of his house, he sees on the ground an ant with six legs, made not of paper but a live creature with a brain, heart and eyes. An entire world. All the libraries in the world cannot contain the great wonder that this little creature represents.

So why aren't we amazed and moved? Because the first time we saw an ant, we were two years old, and we still go on with the perception of a two-year-

³ *Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Teshuvah* 2:4.

⁴ *Yeshayahu* 33:13.

old until this very day.

This is how we perceive all aspects of life.

Wonders of Nature

Let's say a person goes into a store and wants to buy something, but he most unfortunately has only five dollars, and the thing he wants to buy costs seven. He feels bad. Whereas if a rich man whose wealth is estimated in the tens of millions will go into a store, even if he has only one dollar in his pocket and he can't buy anything right now, he doesn't feel bad at all, because he knows that his property is worth tens of millions.

We, too, are in fact extremely wealthy. We are millionaires!

Imagine a fancy camera that takes pictures in wonderfully live, sharp color. This camera is capable of working eighteen hours a day, seven days a week, for eighty or ninety years. Everything that the camera photographs is stored on a small film. There is no need to replace or add film. And the lens washes itself regularly in a special liquid that protects it from deterioration.

How much is a camera like this worth? At least a million dollars.

Each one of us has two cameras like this. Two eyes.

And how much is a brain worth?

And how much a heart?

And how much a baby?

If so, how come people aren't happy? Their wealth is estimated in the tens of millions!

Here is another example: imagine an elderly Jew 150 years ago describing to his little grandson what *Gan Eden* is like: you have a really nice house there, there is a spot on the wall over here that provides cold water, another spot over there that provides hot water. You don't have to go and draw water from the well. And if you want to cook you don't have to kindle a fire. You just put the pot down on a certain spot, and the food starts cooking! And when your clothing gets soiled, you just put it in a special box and it comes out clean...

Our living routines today are actually "*Gan Eden*

on earth," but we aren't excited and impressed by them. This is only because we have grown used to it all. The way we perceive the eye, and the standard of living we have, and the existence of the sun and moon and everything else in this world, is like the perception of a five-year-old child!

Rote Mitzvos

The Prophet Yeshayahu protests this:

וַתְּהִי יִרְאַתָּם אֶתִּי מִצְוֹת אֲנָשִׁים – Their fear of Me was like a human command performed by rote.⁵

Yeshayahu's protest is not just over the fact that people perform *mitzvos* by rote. He says, "Their fear of Me." He is talking about their *yiras Shamayim*! Even a person's fear of Heaven can be by rote. It can be out of habit, without thought.

Our perception of *Hashem*, of the *Siddur* and the *Chumash*, could well be that of a five-year-old-child. This is indeed called, "those who are far." It is serving *Hashem* from a distance of thirty years, from the time we first came to know Him. Only someone who "recently drew close to *Hashem*", who just now renewed himself, is among "those who are close."

For example: Every *Shabbos* we recite the *nishmas* prayer. If we would pay careful attention to the words we are saying, we would be filled with inner excitement.

This is the *avodah* of Elul: to do away with the "rote", to stop just doing things out of habit. To become like a "maiden", like *baalei teshuvah* who recently drew close to *Hashem*. To awaken our affection when we serve *Hashem*, similar to the affection of bride and groom. To get the feeling of newness, to approach *avodas Hashem* as if this was the first time we approached the *Siddur*, to be moved by every *halachah*, every *berachah* and every spiritual feeling.

Renewing oneself is the power of *teshuvah*. It means being a completely new person. This is the *avodah* of Elul.

⁵ Yeshayahu 29:13.

The Avodah of Self-Renewal

We will bring a few examples to illustrate the *avodah* renewing oneself.

Chazal say about the great merit that is inherent in Torah learning:

Hakadosh Baruch Hu said to Yisrael, “I sold you My Torah, and so to speak I was sold along with it.”⁶

Let’s imagine someone sells his car for three thousand dollars. The buyer pays the sum, and receives the keys. The buyer then turns to the seller and says, “Now give me a ride to such and such a place.”

The seller is a bit surprised. What does the buyer expect of him? But the buyer is insistent: “I paid you, now you have to drive me where I need to go.”

The seller retorts, “What do you think? That for three thousand dollars, you bought a car and a driver to go along with it?!”

Yet with the Torah, it indeed is so. When a person learns, for instance, the *Gemara* topic of “*shnayim ochazin b’tallis*,” he thereby acquires the Torah together with the Giver of the Torah.

Now, let’s understand the import of, “So to speak I was sold along with it.” If a person would buy a car and the tremendously mighty *Og Melech HaBashan* to go along with it, he would not have to worry about money for the rest of his life. *Og Melech HaBashan* will get him whatever he needs. When a person learns Torah and gets a hold on an explanation from *Tosafos* or a piece from R. Akiva Eiger, he has so to speak acquired *Hashem* Himself!!

Here is another teaching of *Chazal*:

When a person slaps the cheek of a Jew, it is as if he slaps the cheek of the *Shechinah*.⁷

⁶ *Shemos Rabbah* 33:1.

⁷ *Sanhedrin* 58b.

There are many people who have heard and seen this teaching of *Chazal* time and again, but it doesn’t make an impression on them. Nevertheless, let us realize what this teaching is saying: when someone slaps his friend, who did he slap? The holy *Shechinah*. This should shake a person up a little.

If so, how does it happen that one Jew slaps another? And how can people keep on talking *lashon hara* in spite of all the Chofetz Chaim’s books? Because we first heard at the age of four that we mustn’t hit our friend, or speak *lashon hara*, and we stay with this same perception.

Returning as a Maiden

This is the character of the month of Elul, the month of *teshuvah*. And this is the *avodah* of this month: be a *besulah*, a “maiden”. A virgin girl. Approach everything like a new person who “has neither merits nor demerits.”

Pick up the *Siddur* as if this is the first time you ever *davened*. Go to *shul* like it is the first time you ever entered a *shul*. Give it a thought: what is this building? Who lives here? *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*!! And now you are going in for the first time to “meet” with Him.

We all recite *vidui*, saying: “*Ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu...*” Think about it. *Ashamnu* – I am guilty. A person is used to blaming others, but.... Then we say *bagadnu* – I betrayed. Did we ever think of ourselves as traitors? *Gazalnu* – I am a crook. Why don’t we shudder when we confess our sins? Only because we got used to it.

Think about the simple meaning of the words and reflect on them. Renew yourself, and feel like a *baal teshuvah* who recently drew close to *Hashem*. This is what *teshuvah* is about. This is the special *avodah* of the month of Elul. ●