

A New Start

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In Yeshivas Radin, there was a break before the blowing of the shofar on the morning of Rosh Hashanah to afford the mispallelim an opportunity to prepare themselves for the great mitzvah.

Unfortunately, several bochurim used the time to check out the goings on at the local shuls. They returned to yeshiva and were discussing their findings near the door to the bais medrash, when the Chofetz Chaim, wrapped in his tallis, entered to deliver his pre-shofar shmuess. He picked up pieces of their conversation and moved along without making any comment.

He walked slowly and purposefully to his place at the front of the bais medrash and began his shmuess. The Chofetz Chaim said, "I will start with a moshol," and began telling a story.

There was a couple who were blessed with one son. They loved him dearly, with all their being, and he loved them. As difficult as it was, when he became older, they understood that they had to send him away to yeshiva in order for him to learn and grow. The yeshiva was far from their town and they never got to see him.

A few months went by and then suddenly his mother became very ill and passed away shortly thereafter. The grieving father knew that he had to tell his son, but he worked hard to come up with a way of breaking the news to him that would not overwhelm him with too much sadness for the only son to bear.

The father came up with an idea. He would purchase a new suit for his son and would send it to him at the yeshiva. He would write his son a letter about his mother's passing, and he would place the letter in one of the suit's pockets. That way, when the boy would read the letter, at least he would be wearing the new suit and would be in a good mood.

The father purchased a fine suit and sent it with a messenger to the yeshiva with the carefully written note in a pocket. In those days, nobody got a suit very often, so a new suit was a big deal. When the suit arrived, the boy was overjoyed with it and showed it to his friends with great pride and joy.

Finally, he put on the suit. Everyone told him how great he looked in it. But then he stuck his hand into the pocket and found the note from his father. In a second, his joy was gone and his pride quickly changed to distress. His mother had died and he was saddened.

The Chofetz Chaim explained that throughout the year, everyone has their little enjoyments and pleasures, but we need to know that somewhere, there is a note, and on it is written what was decided for us on Rosh Hashanah for the year.

We can't reach into our pockets and remove the note to read it and know what is in store for us, but there is a way for us to do something that will improve what is written on the note. That is revealed to us in the posuk, "Tiku bachodesh shofar bakeseh leyom chageinu... – Blow the shofar on the first day of the moon's renewal, when it is unseen and covered..." What the posuk is hinting at is that through the blowing of the shofar, you can sweeten the judgment that is hidden.

Therefore, said the Chofetz Chaim, before the shofar is blown we need to take a few minutes and become serious, thinking about all that has transpired over the past year and doing teshuvah on those things that require teshuvah so that we merit a good year.

We are now at that time of year, when Hakadosh Boruch Hu sits in judgement and decides what type of year each person will have. This is a time of utter seriousness when we should change focus from whatever else we are thinking about and think about teshuvah and how we can turn the scales in our favor.

What can we do? Where do we start?

A perfect place is the Rambam's Hilchos Teshuvah, where he holds our hand and takes us through the process.

It is interesting that after laying out for us over several perekim the obligation and path of teshuvah, the Rambam changes gears in perek 5. He writes in halacha 1, "Permission is granted to every person. If he wishes to turn himself to the correct path and be a righteous person, he can do so. However, if a person wishes to act improperly and be wicked, he can do so as well... Man is the only creature that differentiates between good and bad and has the ability to do whatever he pleases, good or bad..."

It seems that the Rambam is changing gears from helping us through the path of teshuvah to a discussion of something tangential to what he had been discussing. We wonder how this impacts us in our quest for teshuvah.

In perek 5, halacha 2, he writes, "Let it not enter your mind that unwise gentiles and most unwise Jews say that Hashem decrees upon a person at birth whether he will be righteous or wicked. It is not so. Every person can be as righteous as Moshe Rabbeinu or as wicked as Yerovom. He can be intelligent or dim, compassionate or cruel... Nobody can force him or decree upon him or drag him to either path, for it is a person's own choice which way to go."

Then he says, "Therefore, if a person sins, he has hurt himself, and it is proper that he cry and bemoan what he has done to his soul... Because of our own volition, we have done these bad acts. We should do teshuvah and leave our sins behind, for it is up to us."

The Rambam then writes in halacha 3, "This concept is fundamental, a pillar upon which the totality of Torah and mitzvos rest... The choice (between blessing and curse) is in the hands of man. A person may follow his desires to do good or bad... Hashem doesn't force or decree that people do good or bad. Everything is left to man's free choice."

In halacha 4, he continues, "If Hashem were to decree that an individual be righteous or wicked, or that he would be born with a characteristic that would draw him to a certain way of conduct, attitude or deed, as fools who believe in astrology claim, then how could Hashem command us, through His nevi'im, to do specific actions and desist from others...if it has already been decreed on man that he behave in a particular fashion?

"What would be the relevance of the entire Torah? Where is the sense of justice that would administer punishment and reward? ...Don't wonder how it can be that man has free will to act as he pleases, if nothing can happen in the universe without the permission and will of the Creator. Even though whatever we do is in accord with Hashem's will, we alone are responsible for our own actions... Just as the Master of the Universe

desired that fire and wind rise upwards, while elements of water and earth flow downward...that each creation has its specific nature which He created for it...so too, He wishes for man to have free choice and to be responsible for his actions without being compelled to act in any specific way... Therefore, man is judged according to his behavior.”

And finally, in halacha 5, he writes, “Because Hakadosh Boruch Hu is already aware of what will happen even before it occurs...if Hashem knows that man will be righteous, it will then be impossible for man to be wicked. For if it were possible for man to defy what Hashem knows, then it would mean that His knowledge is lacking...

“Know that this area is ‘longer than the earth and wider than the sea,’ with deep and fundamental principles and lofty concepts dependent upon it... Human knowledge cannot grasp this concept in its entirety, for just as it is beyond the potential of man to comprehend and conceive the essential nature of the Creator...so, too, it is beyond man’s capacity to comprehend and conceive Hashem’s knowledge.”

As you read the words of the Rambam, you can imagine the learned teacher of every observant Jew lovingly reaching out through the ages. With much compassion, we imagine the Rambam’s smile as he says, “Aval tzorich atah leida ulehovin badovor hazeh she’ani omeir.” He begs us, “Please know and understand deeply what I am saying.”

After explaining the difficulty in properly understanding the concepts of yediah and bechirah, the Rambam concludes, “This is certain: Man’s actions are in his own hands, and Hakadosh Boruch Hu does not lead him in a specific direction.”

And once more, he reaches out to us and tells us, “Know this, without any doubt, that what a person does is totally up to him and Hashem does not pull or push him in any direction, nor does He dictate to him to do this and not to do that.” And then he says something peculiar: “This fact is not verified only through religious tracts, but is proven without a doubt from divrei chochmah.”

We read these words and wonder why the Rambam goes to such great lengths to explain to us and convince us of the principles of bechirah. Why is it so important? Why is it so basic to hilchos teshuvah to know that it is a person’s choice as to what type of individual to be? Why is that so integral to performing teshuvah?

In fact, the Raavad (ibid., halacha 5) comments that he doesn’t understand why the Rambam goes into a lengthy discussion of these topics. He also writes that the Rambam opened up a conversation and did not complete it.

Finally, why does the Rambam conclude by stating that this is a proven fact and has nothing to do with religion?

Let us try to understand the connection between teshuvah and bechirah and suggest what the Rambam’s message might be.

In our generation, the age of entitlement, the most common reaction and defense when a person does something wrong is to look for someone to blame. Everyone claims to be a victim of some type or another. People don’t blame themselves for acting improperly. That would necessitate owning up to their actions and doing something about it. Instead, people – and society at large – search for outside factors upon which to blame improper behavior. If a person fails, he says that it is because his parents were too authoritarian or too

permissive. His mother showed too much love; his father didn't show enough. They blame the behavior on the school – it was too big, too small, too intimidating, too free.

A person's behavior is blamed on the family he was born into. They were poor; what do you expect? They were rich; he was spoiled. Or on the neighbors. They were rich, they were poor, they had too many toys, they didn't have enough toys. They ruined me.

The Gemara in Massechet Avodah Zarah (17a) tells the story of Rabi Elozor ben Durdaya. Though he was a most immoral person, in the end he was inspired to do teshuvah.

Overcome with shame and regret for his actions, he fled for the hills, determined to do teshuvah. He beseeched the mountains and hills to plead his case with Hashem. They refused to intercede on his behalf, telling him that he had to argue his case himself. He turned to the heavens and earth to intercede, but they also turned him down. He looked to the sun and moon for help, but was similarly rejected.

Finally, he collapsed, his head in his hands, crying from the depths of his being. Eventually, he stood up and proclaimed, "Ein hadovor talui ela bi. It all depends on me. It's my responsibility."

Finally accepting that what he had done was his own responsibility and no one but he could make it right, he collapsed in tears and died. As his soul left him, a bas kol announced that Rabi Elozor ben Durdaya's teshuvah was accepted and he was destined for Olam Haba.

Darshonim cite the Gemara as a portrayal of the teshuvah process a person must undergo. They explain that when the Gemara states that Rabi Elozor ben Durdaya turned to the "horim," the mountains, and asked them to daven for him, this is to be understood allegorically. The darshonim would say, "Al tikri horim, ela hoirim." He wasn't referring to the mountains and asking them to pray for him. He was blaming his situation on his parents. Perhaps they had spoiled him or deprived him or hadn't given him enough love, in contemporary parlance. He tried blaming them, but it didn't work. So he searched for others to blame.

When the Gemara says that he reached out to heaven and earth, it represents his attempt to blame the environment – his schools, teachers and friends. He tried blaming them. They influenced me. Everyone else was also doing it. They picked on me. The teachers were lousy. It's their fault.

That tact also didn't absolve him of responsibility for his sins.

So he tried blaming the sun and moon, meaning his financial situation. He was too rich. Mah yaaseh haben shelo yecheta? He was too poor. What can be expected of him?

When that also didn't work, he tried blaming the mazalos for his conduct. This is perhaps a hint to the belief cited by the Rambam that astrology influences man's behavior. Rabi Elozor tried arguing that it wasn't his fault that he was such an immoral person, for this was his nature; the weakness was inborn.

The Heavenly Court rejected this defense as it had rejected all his previous attempts.

Finally, with all his excuses refuted, Rabi Elozor ben Durdaya concluded that "Ein hadovor talui ela bi." What he did with his life was his fault, not anyone else's. He became consumed by that thought and overwhelmed by

the weight of the inherent responsibility he had now perceived for the first time. With that realization, he accomplished teshuvah.

And this is the explanation for why the Rambam inserts the concept of bechirah into Hilchos Teshuvah. This is because as a person works to improve himself and turn himself around, he realizes that it is not always easy and he starts looking for ways out. He turned to teshuvah so that he may merit a good year, but he begins looking for other ways to get a good judgement. He shifts blame and says that it is not his fault that he sinned.

He begins to say that his transgressions happened not because of him, but because of conditions of his life which are beyond his control. He took a wrong turn because he is not very smart or because he is too smart. What happened to him was not his fault. It is because of something someone did to him, or said to him, or threatened to do to him. He says that he ended up in a bad place because of other people, because of circumstances he found himself in, because he lives on the wrong side of town, because his wife misled him, or her husband misled her, or it was the kids' fault.

A person doing teshuvah is forced to come face to face with his failings, and rather than owning up to what he did and the bad choices he made, it is easier to shift the blame and, instead of offering Hashem teshuvah, offer Him excuses.

So the Rambam interjects in Hilchos Teshuvah that every person has choices. Every person can choose on which path to go and whether to go the right way or the wrong way, to the right or the left, the road of chaim or the other road. He tells us not to shirk responsibility. If you want to be written down for a good year, you have to acknowledge that you went wrong, learn your lesson, repent, ensure that you will not act that way again, and do the required teshuvah. Then you will be returned to the good graces of Hakadosh Boruch Hu, so to speak.

The Rambam is reminding us that what a person makes of his life is his own choice. Some have it easier and others have it harder. Irrespective of a person's background or situation, Hashem has granted him the ability to overcome it all and become as great as Moshe Rabbeinu, if he so chooses.

However, as long as a person feels comfortable blaming his present on his past and on things beyond his control, he will not engage in teshuvah and all of hilchos teshuvah will be theoretical.

The Rambam expends much effort in this perek in addressing people with that mindset. He says to them, "What you are and what you make of your life is your own choice. No one can force you to be evil. No one can force you to sin. If you sin, it is because you let your yeitzer hora get the better of you. There are many people who had those same experiences as you, yet they are righteous, outstanding individuals. They triumphed over their circumstances, and so can you."

There are many people who rose from their unfortunate situations and became great talmidei chachomim. In fact, Chazal say, "Hizaharu bivnei aniyim ki meihen teitzei Torah." Poverty is not an excuse for a life of crime, just as wealthy children are not guaranteed a blessed life. Every person can become magnificent or feeble, great or small, good or bad.

We have to get rid of the idea that we are victims of circumstances and realize how blessed we are, with everything in place for us to rise above whatever we think is holding us down.

The Rambam says that this is a fact of life and cannot be argued. What a person makes of his life is not preordained, but is wholly dependent upon the choices he makes and the way he deals with challenges. When we come to do teshuvah, we cannot blame our situation on anyone but us. Nobody is ever so far gone to declare that he cannot return to the path of the good and the just.

Even Rabi Elozor ben Durdaya, who was the lowest of the low, was able to do teshuvah and bring himself to the level that a bas kol announced that he would be accepted to Olam Haba.

Every person is unique. Each person has different abilities and challenges. In order to succeed, people must believe in themselves and their ability to withstand the challenges life throws their way.

At this time of year, we need to put the narishkeiten out of mind, curtail the usual chit chat, and instead get serious and introspective and think about ourselves and where we are holding. It is between us and Hashem. When we do teshuvah, we can bring ourselves back to our original starting situation, before things started going downhill for us. We get a new start, with new energy, and appreciate the abilities we each have. Everyone has abilities, there is nobody who doesn't.

Rosh Hashanah is not only the start of a new year, but a renewal of creation, of the whole world, including us. We become new again, no longer weighed down with negativity and old baggage. We become new, armed with optimism and a positive sense of self and commitment, with a renewed appreciation of who we are and what we can accomplish.

Creation began on 25 Elul and was completed on Rosh Hashanah, with the creation of man. On Rosh Hashanah, everything begins anew, and when we merit to have done a complete teshuvah, we also begin as new, from scratch, with a note in our pocket that tells of the good year Hakadosh Boruch Hu has decided for us.

May we all merit a teshuvah sheleimah and a kesivah vachasimah tovah.