

New Beginnings

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It is interesting that although Rosh Hashanah is included in the Aseres Yemei Teshuvah, we don't mention teshuvah in our tefillos and don't recite the viduy as we do during the rest of the Aseres Yemei Teshuvah. Why?

We are all familiar with the Medrash (Shir Hashirim Rabbah 5:2), which states that Hakadosh Boruch Hu proclaims to Klal Yisroel to open within themselves an entrance for teshuvah the size of a needle's eye, and He will open for them gateways wide enough for wagons to pass through.

The meaning of that Chazal is understood together with the Gemara (Yoma 38b), which teaches that "haba letaheir mesayin oso," Hashem provides assistance for those who want to purify themselves.

We can understand this further by recognizing that on Rosh Hashanah we don't speak of teshuvah. Instead, much of the avodah and tefillos center on Malchiyos, acknowledging Hashem's Kingship over the world.

In last week's parsha, Nitzavim (30:11), Moshe Rabbeinu tells the Jewish people that the mitzvah he is commanding them that day is not difficult to perform. The Ramban, in his commentary, explains that Moshe was referring to the mitzvah of teshuvah.

This raises a question: How can we say that teshuvah is easy, when it requires a person to undergo permanent behavioral change, which is often quite challenging?

We can answer that when a person performs a mitzvah or learns Torah, that action draws him closer to Hashem and brings upon him kedusha and life itself. As the posuk in Mishlei (3:18) states, "Eitz chaim hi lamachazikim bah"—the Torah is a tree of life to those who grasp it.

Conversely, when a person sins, he loses a measure of kedusha and vitality, as the limb associated with that aveirah becomes spiritually weakened. Moreover, committing the aveirah distances a person from Hashem and creates a separation between him and his Creator.

The first step in teshuvah is to acknowledge that everything in our lives and the world comes from Hashem, and that we are subservient to His will. Once we recognize Him as our King, it naturally follows that we must obey Him and strive to be connected to Him.

Therefore, says the Ramban, teshuvah is a simple matter. Any person without an agenda to do whatever his heart desires, looks at the world and what takes place in it and can easily see that the world and all its creations did not come into existence on their own. Anyone who looks at any living creature and examines it can see intricacies that only Hakadosh Boruch Hu could have created.

Anyone who takes even a cursory glance at the events of this world or studies history—especially the history of the Jewish people and their miraculous survival through centuries of persecution by nations that sought to destroy them—must recognize that there is a Supreme Power pulling the strings and making everything happen the way it does.

Take a look at what has unfolded in Eretz Yisroel over the past year, beginning on Shemini Atzeres, when rampaging Gazans killed and wounded thousands of Israelis. People were left questioning how the highly regarded Israeli army and intelligence services could have been so incompetent. There seemed to be no way to comprehend how such a calamity could have occurred.

And now, almost a year later, the same people who were so inept were able to pull off a brilliant string of successes against their Hezbollah enemies to the north of the country. From sidelining many fighters by blowing up their beepers and walkie-talkies and totally demoralizing the entire group to methodically ridding the world of Hezbollah's commanders and heads, one by one and in groups, until they killed its very leader, the Israeli army and intelligence teams had a string of spectacular successes.

How can it be that the group that couldn't stop wanton murder of so many of its citizens now appears invincible? Of course, the answer is that their successes and defeats are coordinated by Hakadosh Boruch Hu. When He wants them to win, He makes everything go amazingly brilliant for them, and when He wants them to lose, they are the gang that couldn't shoot straight.

When a person recognizes that Hashem created and runs the world, he understands that he should be following Him and conducting himself as Hashem expressed in His Torah.

So, the first prerequisite for teshuvah is to recognize that Hashem is the Melech. Therefore, on Rosh Hashanah, as we earnestly engage in teshuvah, we concentrate on Malchiyos, on acknowledging and celebrating Hashem's sovereignty. Once we accomplish that, the rest of teshuvah is easy, because everyone understands that they must follow the Melech. Not only must we follow, but anyone who understands that Hashem is the Source of all life and His Torah is the tree of life comprehends that it is for their own benefit to follow Him.

We then hear the blasts of the shofar, which awaken us from our apathy and poor habits, and we become aroused to return to Hashem and His embrace. Thus, the word teshuvah has at its root the word shov, which means to return.

So yes, it is easy to see that the world is Hashem's. He created it and controls it. Once we recognize this, it becomes simple to decide to observe His commandments. Not only is it easy, but when Hashem sees that a person is turning to Him, He immediately welcomes him and lifts him closer, enabling him to approach, reconcile his past misdeeds, and resolve to remain in Hashem's embrace.

Thus, we ask, “Rachameinu keracheim av al bonim. Show us the mercy that a father shows his children!” When a child falls and is not able to pick himself up, the father bends down and lifts his child up to him. So too, Hakadosh Boruch Hu helps every person who has fallen and seeks to raise themselves. Especially during Elul, the seforim say, “HaMelech basodeh. The King has come to the field,” for during this month, Hashem lowers Himself, as it were, and makes Himself available to us to enable us to do teshuvah and return to Him. What we need to do is realize that He is here, waiting for us, and desire to be reconnected with Him. He does the rest.

During the period in which Rav Shmuel Rozovsky served as rosh yeshiva at the Ponovezh Yeshiva, there was a boy who decided that he was no longer interested in living the frum life that he was born into and lived until learning in Rav Shmuel’s shiur. He abruptly left the yeshiva and signed up for the army. He deserted his friends, who, in turn, deserted him, and there was no contact between them anymore.

Initially, he enjoyed the army life and was satisfied with the drastic change he had made. However, after a few months on the army base, he began feeling increasingly uncomfortable. His conscience began eating at him and he started feeling bad for throwing away everything he had previously cherished. His soul was starving and he was missing his friends and everything else about his previous life. But he knew that he had made the change and there was no going back. He would have to make the best of his new situation.

One day, a sign appeared on the bulletin board stating that he had mail. He was thrilled that somebody was finally writing to him. He racked his brain to try to figure out who in his old world would write to him. He couldn’t imagine.

He went to the office to pick up the letter. On the envelope, there was no return address, but the name Shmuel was written as the sender. He didn’t remember any friends named Shmuel. His curiosity was piqued.

He ripped it open and this is what the enclosed note said: “My dear friend, regardless of what happened to you, and no matter where you currently find yourself, I want to meet you and talk to you.” It was signed, “Your friend, Shmuel Rozovsky.”

The sender was none other than the world-renowned rosh yeshiva, Rav Shmuel Rozovsky. He trembled with excitement and resolved to meet his former rebbi. But he was in the army, and in the army, you can’t just pick up and leave—even to meet Rav Shmuel Rozovsky. He was surrounded by gates and fences, with no way to get permission to go anywhere.

So, he jumped over the gates and fences and made his way to Bnei Brak to Rav Shmuel’s home. They spoke for a few hours, and when they were done, the boy decided that he was going back to where he belonged.

On Rosh Hashanah, Hashem reaches out to us, inviting us to return to where we belong. This day marks the beginning of Hashem’s Kingship, as it is the day man was created. As His

Kingship is renewed, so is the potential for each of us to be renewed. We each have the opportunity to rectify our mistakes and reclaim our rightful place and position in this world.

We are encouraged to do teshuvah and bring ourselves closer to Hashem. After having gone through the month of Elul, we are prepared to make those changes as we enter the Yom Hadin and the Aseres Yemei Teshuvah. We reflect on our behavior over the past year and strive to do teshuvah for the times we acted improperly in our interactions with others and in observing the halachos of the Torah.

We declare our desire to return to the way we were before we sinned, before we adopted negative middos and bad habits. We say, "Hashem, we want to return to Your embrace, confident in the knowledge that You created this world and guide every part of it. You await us and our tefillos, eager to grant us a blessed, happy, healthy, and successful year, as only You can. We ask You to please accept our tefillos."

Hayom haras olam. Today is the day of creation. Not just back when the world was created, but also today and now.

Hayom yaamid bamishpot kol yetzurei olamim. Today, the forces of creation are strongly present, as Hashem judges all His creatures and decides what type of year they will have.

Rosh Hashanah marks a new beginning for everyone. The realization that we can start over gives us the confidence to understand that, although we may have made mistakes and taken wrong turns, we are not doomed to remain where we don't truly belong. Through teshuvah, we can rectify our actions as if we never strayed. It is a day of new beginnings for the world and for each of us. If we seize this opportunity, we can transform ourselves, emerge renewed, and be granted a better life in the year ahead.

Rosh Hashanah provides us with the awareness that we can change. In the shofar's plaintive wail, we hear echoes of the blasts that were sounded at Har Sinai, when Klal Yisroel was formed into the nation of Hakadosh Boruch Hu. The shofar then proclaimed a new beginning. The world had reached its destiny. Ahead was much hope and promise.

The shofar was also blown at Yovel. When we blow it on Rosh Hashanah, it hints at the independence of the Yovel year, the collective song of freedom chanted by so many released slaves going home to begin life anew. The earth, as well, joins in the process, as land returns to its original owners at Yovel. We are reminded that we can all start again. We can get a fresh start, with a new lease on life. Whatever happened in the past will stay in the past. It won't weigh us down. We can get rid of the things that didn't go right, the things we did wrong, and the mistakes we made, and begin anew, unencumbered by what was.

The Ramchal writes that when the shofar is blown by us in this world, it strengthens that which was accomplished at the time of Matan Torah [the tikkun] when the shofar was blown, and it

helps bring about that which will happen [the tikkun hasholeim] when the shofar gadol will be sounded and the world will reach the destiny for which it was created.

May we all merit for Hashem to hear our tefillos, accept our teshuvah, welcome us to His embrace, and have the Great Shofar blown to herald that the geulah has arrived.

Kesivah vachasimah tovah.