Rav Chaim David HaLevy in his introduction to the topic “The foundations of Teshuvah and its main Halachos” begins by quoting the following section from Parashas Nitzavim (Devarim 30:1-2, 10-14):

And it shall come to pass, when all these things are come upon you, the blessing and the curse… and you shall return unto Hashem, and hearken to His voice… if you shall hearken to the voice of Hashem, to keep His commandments and His statutes… if you return unto Hashem with all your heart, and with all your soul. For this commandment… it is not too hard for you… It is not in heaven… Neither is it beyond the sea… But the word is very close to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, that you may do it. 

Rav Halevy writes: “This is the source of the mitzvah of Teshuvah: ‘Veshavta’ (and you shall return) ‘Tashuv’ (and you will return) to Hashem your God. When a man turns from his sins, then he has done Teshuvah (repented). And this is the Mitzvah that is hinted at in the Torah when it says “It is not too hard for you… in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it.” 

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One of the halachos he brings says the following:

“Neither Teshuvah nor Yom HaKippurim absolves one of sins other than between man and Hashem… but sins between one man and another… are never forgiven until one appeases one’s friend.”

This halachah brings us back to the 1st sentence in this parashah (Devarim 29:9-10):

You are standing this day all of you before Hashem: your heads, your tribes, your elders, and your officers, even all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives, and thy stranger that is in the midst of thy camp, from the hewer of thy wood unto the drawer of thy water.

Notice the word “Nitzavim” translated here as “standing.” Rav Techorsh in his book Pninei Efraim on the weekly parashah, explains that this is not simple standing, as in “to stand someplace” but rather it implies strength and stability. For example, when Yosef dreams about the bundles of wheat that stand and bow down, he states that his bundle “Kama alumasi vegam nitzavah – my bundle arose and also stood upright” (Bereishis 37:7). The brothers understood that this reflects the strength of Joseph’s rule and were therefore angry with him.

Going back to the 1st passage in this parashah, we see that the word Nitzavim is followed by a description: “all of you…” and the Torah emphasizes “all” by describing who is included: women, children, everyone no matter who they are.

Rav Techorsh states that this combination comes to teach us the following idea: When does Israel stand together in strength? When Israel is together, standing before Hashem as one person, with one heart and one soul.

A derash was presented based on the sentence that describes how Ya’akov changed the flock’s appearance to comply with Lavan’s demands (Bereishis 30:41-42):

And it came to pass, whenever… the flock did warm [in heat], that Ya’acov laid the rods… but when the flock were gathered [Be’ha’atif], he put them not in…

Ya’akov places the rods (i.e. sticks) only when the flock is in heat, qt which time the flock separates and is not united. When the flock is gathered together, he does not place the sticks. So, we see that the “sticks” we get from the Nations come only when we are separated from each other, when we are “hot,” angry with each other, when one person acts against another. But when we are in the situation of “Be’ha’atif” or as the prophet Yechezkel describes it: “And you My sheep, the sheep of My pasture, are man…” (Yechezkel 34:31). When the nation of Israel is united as one man then there are no “sticks.”

Historically, we find this during the time of Achav. The Talmud Yerushalmi (Pe’ah ch. 1, p. 16) asks why there was a time when David fought and his people, who were all tzadikim, died, while during the time of Achav, when they were sinners (worshippers of other gods), they won their wars? The Yerushalmi
answers that during the time of David they spoke Lashon HaRa, an action by which one man harms another – a sin of Bein Adam LaChaveiro (between man and man), while during the time of Achav they did not speak Lashon HaRa.

This parshah, which talks about unity is read the week before Rosh Hashanah, when Hashem decides the fates of nations. BeEzras Hashem, let us all decide to be united as one, and may Hashem bless us that we will win our wars with our enemies and that we will have no more “sticks” cast in our way.

RABBI MICHA BERGER

Bakeish Shalom

upon oneself small steps toward improvement) will only go so far without a supportive peer group. No matter seriously one commits this Elul and Aseres Yemei Teshuvah to developing one’s bitachon, one’s trust in Hashem, if one’s friends think of such an attitude as hopelessly naïve, it is likely that next year at this time one’s level of bitachon will be roughly where it is now.

The Mussar Movement introduced two institutions to provide aspiring bnei aliyah (people seeking ascent) a community and support system.

In Or Yisrael, R’ Yitzchak (“Itzele”) Blazer, the Rav of St. Petersburg, lists the ten greatest innovations of Rav Yisra’el Salanter. Among them is the Beis HaMussar, or Mussar Kloiz in Yiddish, a Mussar House. This was a room set aside for nothing but mussar. A room where the sounds ring of the singsong of mussar study, of hispa’alus, and of chaburos and chavrusos getting together to improve themselves. A place where people can engage in mussar, and rather than feeling awkward, as an outsider, you are supported and motivated by the people around you. A place where eventually regulars would be in the right frame of mind just through the associations triggered by entering the beis mussar.

Establishing a beis mussar today would be pretty difficult. Few of us have the resources to do so, and even

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1 Devarim 29:9
2 Ibid v. 9,10
3 Ibid 31:12
4 Chagigah 3a, Mechila 13:102 (where Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah is quoted without the story as context)
5 On Devarim 31:12
6 ad loc.
7 Yerushalmi Yevamos, end of ch. 1
8 Sha’arei Or, ch. 8
fewer have enough people motivated to utilize the resource. However, perhaps we can recapture some of its benefits by setting up a weekly cheider mussar (mussar room) in your shul or a side-room of a local yeshiva or beis medrash. Invite people to come together and learn mussar out loud, possibly in groups.

But getting together to study mussar is only one way to develop chavershaft (a feeling of belonging to a group of close friends) working to help each other improve and develop as Jews. A second idea introduced by the Mussar Movement is the va’ad (literally: committee). Unlike a chaburah, a group that gets together to learn mussar, a va’ad comes together to do mussar.

A typical va’ad consists of six to eight members (although Rav Shlomo Wolbe writes that sizes from 4 to 15 people are workable9) who agree to meet weekly or every other week. They pick a middah to work on together, adopting kabbalos that progress as they work on the middah. A va’ad would typically dedicate three to six months to a middah before moving on to another. A classical va’ad would be run by a rosh va’ad, although it is possible to have the members assume this role in rotation. It is also critical for members of the va’ad to stay in contact, either in person, by telephone or email, to check on each others’ progress and offer help during the week. Otherwise, it is too easy to lose the momentum between meetings.

For example, assume a va’ad chooses to address the middah of savlanus, having patience with other people.10 The first week, the rosh va’ad might prepare some material from the book Cheshbon HaNefesh. The va’ad would discuss how to

9 Alei Shur, vol. 2, pg. 191. See also the resources available at <http://www.aishdas.org/mussar.html>

10 From experience, our ve’adim have had more success choosing midos one desires to strengthen rather than those that one wants to eliminate. For example, increasing one’s patience with others rather than wearing down one’s temper.

The prayer opens: Unesaneh tokef kedushas hayom – let us convey the sanctity of the day, for it is awe-inspiring and frightening.

And on it we will carry Your Kingship. The word is “tinasei,” we will carry. It is for us to declare Him King. As David wrote: “ki Lashem hamluchah umoshel bagoyim – For G-d has the kingship, but he is a dictator over the nations.” Until the day we describe in Aleinu “and they will all accept the yoke of your kingship.” The difference between a king and a dictator is the acclimation of the people. The king, because his rule is accepted, rules through kindness. A dictator must impose his will by force.

R. Eliyahu Shuviv, of Yeshivas Har Etzion, creates a fascinating mental image. Rosh Hashanah is on Rosh Chodesh, the day of the new moon. It was up to Sanhedrin to accept two witnesses who saw the new moon, and then they sanctify the month.

We cannot picture the heavens, but traditionally we use imagery to convey the events on an emotional level. In this light, Unesaneh Tokef draws a picture of G-d “sitting” on His throne, which, we are told, is His kindness. The kindness a king can afford beyond that of even a benevolent dictator. All the tzeva’os hashamayim, the legion of angels of the heavens, stand ready to declare G-d’s kingship over the universe(s). Malkiel (the angel whose name means G-d is my king) stands ready with “crown” and “scepter.” And
they stand there, and wait. For what? For two pushete yidden, two simple Jews, to say “we have seen the new moon” so that Sanhedrin will declare the day the first of Tishrei.

A little later it describes, “a great shofar will be blown, and a quiet, thin sound will be heard.” “Quiet, thin sound” is a reference to a lesson Hashem teaches Eliyahi in 1 Kings. First the prophet is buffeted by a powerful wind, and G-d says, “I Am not in the wind”, then he hears a loud crash, “I Am not in the crash”, then a fire, and G-d says that He is neither there. Then “a small thin voice.” G-d’s voice in this world is within us, if we would only listen.

The great shofar is blown – today is judgment day! And finally, we can hear the voice of G-d calling within us. This sets the angels atremble. They have no free will, no consciousness nor conscience, they are automata, pushed and pulled like leaves in the spiritual wind.

Uvo sinasei melchusecha – on this day we will carry Your Kingship. It is the task of the Jewish people alone. People, human beings with free will, loftier than angels because we have the potential for growth, to hear and head that small thin voice. It is our task to bring that message to the rest of humanity. If two Jews do not declare it so – it is not coronation day!

This is the theme of Aleinu, which we say daily, and which is taken from the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur Mussaf.

Then, the prayer seems to shift theme. It goes from G-d’s Kingship to that of Divine Justice. That shift, though, is the entire purpose of this period on the calendar. The days upon which we accept G-d as King, as Melech, and not a Mosheil, a Dictator, are the days of mercy – because of our acceptance of his role in running the universe(s).

G-d counts us, lovingly, as individuals; the way a shepherd counts is flock as he lets them pass single file past his crook and through the gate.

On Rosh Hashanah we are inscribed, and on Yom Kippur we are sealed into the Book of Memories that reads itself, as the poet describes it. And this Book of Memories has each deed in it, signed by the hand that did it. G-d doesn’t judge by evidence, but weighs the actual facts. All is known with certitude.

Not just in the actuarial manner of a community – how many will be born, and how many will die. Not just the major life events, the ones that people often think of as “fate”: who will die in their destined time, and who will die early, who in their sleep and who will (G-d forbid) die a violent death. But even exactly how they will die, how much they will earn, who will get sick, who will get honor, who will be humbled. The Chassidic masters teach that even when you stub your toe, or don’t find your money until you search your second pocket as opposed to getting it right away, G-d is trying to tell you something.

But in Judaism, nothing ends with philosophizing. We focus on halachah because the primary question should always be: what does this situation empower me to do?

Three things “pass through” the evil decree: Teshuvah, tefillah and tzedakah. Now, when you are in the throes of accepting G-d as a willing subject, use that chance for mercy, and change yourself, improve the things you’ve been weak in.

Teshuvah – a return. The UK Chief Rabbi, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, likens teshuvah to the waves of immigrants to Israel. The Yemenites, the Moroccans, the Russians and the Ethiopians. They stepped off the plain to a land they never saw before, and suddenly “We are home!” Teshuvah is return to a religious home. Even if you’ve never been there before.

These three things, teshuvah, prayer and charity which we should remember, Jews call tzedakah – justice, parallel the three relationships that dominate our lives.

Teshuvah – improve your self. Are you too quick-tempered? Haughty? How much Torah do you know? How much Torah do you feel?

Tefillah – pray to G-d. Remind yourself that you have a Third Parent, Someone Who wants you to grow, be more than merely a sentient animal.

Tzedakah – How are you doing in your relationships to other people? Do you give charity? Do you speak charitably? Do you help a neighbor? Smile when you greet people? Say hello to the old man sitting on the porch that you pass on the way to the train station? Thank your parents or your spouse lately? Let your children know when they’ve done well?

It would behoove us, I when I write this monologue, you, as you read it, to choose one thing, something we can commit to and have a real chance of succeeding at, just one thing from each of these facets of our lives, to add to our current behavior.