

מתוקים מדבש

*Dei'ah, Binah and Haskel on the weekly parashah*

RABBANIT SHOSHANA BOUBLIL

Bemachashavah Techilah

Rav Chaim David HaLevy in his introduction to the topic “The foundations of *Teshuvah* and its main *Halachos*”¹ 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.*²

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,” meaning, that *Teshuvah* consists of a decision of the heart not to return to the sin and confessing with the mouth...”

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’akov 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

¹ Mekor Chaim HaShalem, vol. VI chapter 215

² Thanks to <http://www.mechon-mamre.org/e/et/et0530.htm>.

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

The first of this week's *parshiyos*, Nitzavim, takes its name from the verse that reads "You stand here, all of you, today, before Hashem your G-d..."¹ Moshe stresses that everyone is there before Him, "your elders, your leaders, all the men of Israel. Your children, your wives..."² Emphasis is given to their standing together as a people.

This idea is repeated in the second *parashah*, *VaYeilech*, when Hashem commands that every seventh year, on *Succos*, we should "*Hakhel* – Assemble the people - the men, the women, and the small children" at the *beis hamikdash* to hear the king read the book of Devarim.³

Rabbi Yochanan ben Beroka and Rabbi Elazar ben Chisma went to Peki'in to visit their *rebbe*, Rabbi Yehoshua. Rabbi Yehoshua asked them to repeat something they had learned in the *beis medrash* since their last encounter. They answered, "We are your students, and we drink of your waters." Rabbi Yehoshua replied, "There is no *beis medrash* where nothing new is taught." So they repeated an idea from Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah. The men went to the gathering to learn, the women to listen (which includes both hearing and accepting what is heard), and the children – to bring reward to those who brought them. Rabbi Yehoshua heard this and exclaimed, "You had

during the time of Achav they did not speak *Lashon HaRa*.

This *parashah*, which talks about unity is read the week before Rosh Hashanah, when Hashem decides the fates of nations. *BeEzras Hashem*, let

such a wonderful pearl, and you were willing for me to miss it?"⁴

The Or haChaim limits this to children too young to understand what is going on. Any child that gets even a glimmer of the event gains *yiras Shamayim* (fear and awe of the One in heaven) simply by having the experience.⁵

Rabbi Meir Simcha HaKohen of Dvinsk⁶ explains why this thought was so special to Rabbi Yehoshua. The Yerushalmi tells us that Rabbi Dosa praised Rabbi Yehoshua as one "who will teach knowledge" and says, "I recall that when he was a baby his mother would take him to *batei medrash* so the Torah would stay with him."⁷ To Rabbi Yehoshua, this thought was a pearl that added meaning to his mother's sacrifice.

The importance of the influence of a community is a recurring theme in this week's *parshiyos*.

And it is a central part of our quest to improve ourselves as well. So far this month we looked at ways that we can make this year's *teshuvah* more real and more permanent than in years past through the tools developed by the *ba'alei mussar*. But an organized program of *hispa'alus*, *cheshbon hanefesh*, and *kabbalos* (intense and personalizing study, a daily accounting of one's choices and actions, and accepting

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 *bonei 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.⁸ 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

¹ Devarim 29:9

² Ibid v. 9,10

³ Ibid 31:12

⁴ Chagigah 3a, Mechilta 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 *chaverschaft* (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

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

The *piyut*, “*Unesaneh Tokef*” consists of two paragraphs added immediately before *Kedushah* in the Chazan’s repetition of the *Amidah* of *Mussaf* on these days. As a *piyut*, it is not technically part of the *Amidah*, and in some communities – for example, the personal synagogue of R. Chaim Brisker – it was not said on Rosh Hashanah on a weekday, as it would be an interruption in the middle of shofar blowing. (The *Amidah* itself is an inherent part of the same mitzvah as shofar blowing, a very interesting, and long, topic.) It is part of Ashkenazic tradition only.

The prayer opens: *Unesaneh tokef kedushas hayom* – let us convey the

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 *midah* 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

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.

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 Shaviv, of Yeshivas Har Etzion, creates a fascinating mental image. Rosh Hashanah is on

implement and internalize the lessons learned. Before adjourning, they would choose a *kabbalah* to start implementing the change. For example, they could resolve that at the end of each day they should take one human interaction and see how the same exchange may have looked from the others’ perspective. During the two weeks between meetings, the next meeting’s *rosh va'ad* either checks in with each member, or has *chavrusos*, pairs, in contact. He takes measure – was the goal they set too hard? Or not ambitious enough? What direction should the next session take? Etc.

The *va'ad* gives structure to working together. The members develop a closeness and openness. They support each other. The benefits of the *va'ad* and *beis mussar* are not simply from the work they do, but from the atmosphere they create. Like the experience of attending *hakhel*, they give you a group that works toward your growth, that advances your climb heavenward.

RABBI MICHA BERGER Sefasai Tiftach

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 malchusecha – 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 money 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

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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.