

The Power of Teshuva

דרשה לנעילה, יום הכפורים תשנ"ד

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כל אחד ואחד מבני האדם יש לו זכויות ועונות, מי שזכויותיו יתירות על עונותיו צדיק, ומי שעונותיו יתירות על זכויותיו רשע, מחצה למחצה בינוני...בכל שנה ושנה שוקלין עונות כל אחד ואחד מבאי העולם עם זכויותיו ביום טוב של ראש השנה, מי שנמצא צדיק נחתם לחיים, ומי שנמצא רשע נחתם למיתה והבינוני תולין אותו עד יום הכפורים אם עשה תשובה נחתם לחיים ואם לאו נחתם למיתה. (רמב"ם הל' תשובה ג')

The Rambam, in Hilchos Teshuva, teaches us a familiar principle: if we have more mitzvos than aveiros, we are considered a "tzaddik" and on Rosh HaShana we are judged for life. If chas v'sholom the opposite is true, our judgement is not for life. If our aveiros and mitzvos are equal, our final judgement is suspended until Yom Kippur, If we do teshuva, if we repent, we will be sealed on Yom Kippur for life; if not, we will not be sealed for life.

For the person who is in the middle, the Rambam makes it clear that the way to tip the scales is through teshuva. R' Yitzchok Blazer, Rav Itzele Peterburger, posed a profound question on this Rambam. Why is it only teshuva that tips the scales and allows the "middle person" to be sealed for life on Yom Kippur? If the scales are equally weighted with mitzvos and aveiros, then the performance of a single mitzvah should suffice to tip the scale for life. Yet, the Rambam does not say that a "middle" person should perform **any** mitzvah - he explicitly says teshuva is required. Why?

A student of Rav Yitzchok answered that we need to understand how judgement works to appreciate what the Rambam is saying. The concept of "majority rule," or that the majority should be followed for decision making, is a concept utilized when applying "din," strict justice. The power of a ruler to enforce laws and rules over his subjects is part and parcel of "Malchios," the attribute of Hashem's kingship and dominion that is the central focus of Rosh HaShana. As such, on Rosh HaShana, the day on which we proclaim Hashem's rule over the entire world and we acknowledge our acceptance of His sovereignty, we are judged with "din," and therefore the way the scales tip determines our fate for the coming year. But the attribute of "din" is relegated to Rosh HaShana. Yom Kippur is the day of "rachamim," mercy. We beseech Hashem on Yom Kippur to judge us mercifully, with favor, outside of the parameters of strict justice. Only heartfelt and meaningful repentance can ensure that Hashem's mercy is awakened. The mere performance of a mitzvah won't suffice. And if we indeed do teshuva, we will merit, as the Rambam said, to be sealed for life.

However, when it comes to doing teshuva, we are faced with a reality: it's not easy. We try every year to improve ourselves. And we inevitably make some misstep at some point. We accept upon ourselves to undertake new practices or changes in our behavior, and we often are

not able to sustain these changes in the long run. We then think that its simply too late to make any real change. This pattern can lead to despair or depression. In the tefilla of Ne'ilah on Yom Kippur, we say *אתה נותן יד לפושעים, וימינך פשוטה לקבל שבים* - that Hashem reaches out his hand to sinners and His right hand is extended to accept those who repent. Rabbi Munk says that we see from these words that if Hashem is reaching out His hand to the sinners, it means He has come to those very sinners to bring them to teshuva. If Hashem Himself comes to the sinners, if He makes the effort, so to speak, to come to us to help us in the process of repentance, it's clear that it is never too late for repentance; Hashem is always there, standing by us with that outstretched hand, ready to help us. We can never say "it's too late."

A prime example of the power of teshuva is placed before us on Yom Kippur in the form of Yonah. The city of Ninveh, capital of Ashur, was a city where idolatry was rampant. The citizens were notorious for their wickedness. The degree of evil in Ninveh was so great that it had a profound impact on the entire Assyrian empire. Ninveh paralleled the Dor HaMabul with the prevalence of theft and robbery. This would appear to be the city where the words of a prophet would be ignored, if not met with scorn and derision. Yet, what do we find? *ויקרא ויאמר עוד ארבעים יום ויניחה נהפכת* - the pasuk says that Yonah told the people of Ninveh that it would be totally overthrown in 40 days time. And what was the reaction of this city of evil doers? *ויאמינו אנשי נינה* "The people of Ninveh believed in Hashem" *ויקראו צום וילבשו שקים מגדולם ועד קטנם* "And they proclaimed a fast, and they wore sackcloth - from the greatest to the least of them."

Why did such wicked people decide to listen to Yonah? What was it about Yonah and what he had to say that had such an profound effect on a normally depraved and indifferent people? The Radak (Yonah 3:5) explains: The men from the ship were in the city, and they related what they had witnessed with Yonah being thrown into the sea, and all the events that occurred, and therefore they believed his prophecy and they repented with a complete repentance." This reformation of the city, with complete repentance, is even more striking after reading the explanation of the Radak on the end of the pasuk; "they proclaimed a fast - even before the warning of the king did they repent on their own, and they fasted and wore sackcloth." Apparently, the words of these sailors moved the people of Ninveh so profoundly that they immediately repented, even before their own king declared that repentance was needed. The residents of Ninveh realized they needed to repent, and did so without despairing over their multitude of past evil deeds. They were clearly inspired and moved, as the Radak says, by the sailors. Who were these sailors? Why were their words so powerful?

The Navi tells us that Yonah was instructed by Hashem to go to Ninveh and let them know that they were on the verge of being punished due to their wickedness. Yonah decided to flee to Tarshish and embarked on a ship headed there. Hashem caused a mighty wind and "the sailors became frightened and they cried out, each to their god. They threw all their wares on the ship into the sea to lighten it. But Yonah descended into the interior of the ship, lay down and fell asleep. The master of the ship approached Yonah and said 'How can you sleep soundly? Get up, and call to your G-d...'" Eventually, the sailors drew lots to see whom was the source of the trouble and doing so revealed that it was Yonah. Yonah was subsequently thrown overboard and the water returned to being calm.

The behavior of the sailors is odd. Ships travel on the sea all the time. Sometimes the ships

are met with calm and smooth sailing, and sometimes they encounter fierce storms. Did every time the sailors encounter stormy and rocky conditions they panic, pray and try to determine via lots the “external” source of their troubles? The Radak says, referencing the Pirkei D’Rabi Eliezer, that what made this trip different is what the sailors saw around them: all the other ships in view were travelling on calm, quiet and tranquil waters, and only their ship was being fiercely tossed and turned. They therefore knew that there must be something unique to their ship that was subjecting them to this life threatening situation.

In Tehillim (107:23-24) it states:

יִרְדּוּ הַיָּם בְּאֲנִיּוֹת עֲשֵׂי מְלָאכָה בְּמִים רַבִּים: הֵמָּה רָאוּ מַעֲשֵׂי ה' וְנִפְלְאוֹתָיו בְּמַצּוֹלָה:

“Those who go down to the sea in ships, who do their work in great waters; they have seen the deeds of Hashem and His wonders in the watery deep.”

The Radak explains that sailors on the decks of ships become overwhelmed by the realization that with the sea, they are at the mercy of roaring waves and dangerous fish. Yet, they gain inspiration from the fact that Hashem bestowed man with the intellect to take mere planks of wood and turn them into a vessel that can safely navigate the watery deep of the oceans. This inspiration and appreciation of Hashem is even greater when the ship is caught in a storm, and it tosses and turns in the fierce waves and wind. Sailors, we see in Tehillim, recognize Hashem and His abilities.

We further see that the Gemora in Kiddushin (82a) says that most sailors are pious. Rashi explains that this is true because sailors are constantly putting themselves in a dangerous situation, are constantly fearful, and therefore acknowledge that Hashem is the only One who can save them. The sailors on Yonah’s ship, based on these sources, already had some degree of recognition and appreciation of Hashem.

The Pirkei D’Rabi Eliezer (9) quoted in part by the Radak writes that on the ship, there were representatives of the 70 different nations and languages. Each of these individuals had his own god and prayed to that god during the violent storm. Yet, that prayer did not help. Yonah had descended into the ship and went to sleep. The master of the ship approached Yonah and said ‘Here we are standing between life and death - and you go to sleep?! What is with you? Yonah replied that he was a Jew. The ship master responded that he heard that the G-d of the Jews is great, and that Yonah should pray to Him as perhaps He will perform wonders for them as He did by the Yam Suf. Yonah responded that the situation was on his account and that he should be cast into the sea, and the storm will subside. The sailors did not want to send Yonah to his death, so they first cast lots - and Yonah was picked. They then threw their possessions off board in hope that would help, and it didn’t. They tried turning back to shore but they could not. They then took Yonah, stood him on the deck and said “Hashem, we do not want innocent blood on our hands. We do not know the nature of this person. He told us himself that this situation was on his account.’ They took him and put him in the water until his knees - and the storm subsided. They brought him back on deck and the storm started once again. They then put him in the water until his neck and the storm subsided. They pulled him up and the storm started again. They then cast him in and immediately the storm stopped.

The sailors were awed at the blatant Hashgacha Pratis, the Divine Providence, displayed in these events with Yonah. R' Shmshon Refael Hirsch said that this was the most conclusive proof of how close Hashem was to them. They saw visible evidence of the power of Hashem. This demonstration had a huge impact on the sailors - sailors who by 'profession' have a built in appreciation of Hashem - and elevated them.

How did it elevate them? We read in Yonah the reaction of the sailors: "The men on the ship felt a great fear of Hashem, they slaughtered a sacrifice to Hashem and took vows." The Radak says that they did not literally offer a sacrifice while on the boat, but they promised to bring sacrifices to Hashem at that time. They also took vows to give charity to the poor. The Mahari Kra says that they all converted to join the nation of Hashem at that moment. The Pirkei D'Rabi Eliezer says that the sailors saw all the miracles that occurred with Yonah and they returned to Yafo, went from there to Yerushalayim, had a Bris Milah performed on themselves, and each one vowed to bring his children and all that he had to the G-d of Yonah. And these people were known as righteous converts.

These sailors, non-Jews, who already had an understanding of who Hashem was, were overcome by the overt presence of the hand of Hashem that they witnessed. This inspired them to come closer to Hashem, to repent, to immediately commit to doing mitzvos. And they were so sincere and so motivated, that when they told the people of Ninveh not to ignore Yonah as he spoke the truth, they imparted that message in such a heartfelt and convincing fashion that a city that was depraved and wicked immediately realized that they needed to change their ways. They did just that.

Teshuva is indeed within our reach. Whether we "know of" Hashem, like the sailors, or are distant from the path Hashem desires for us, like the residents of Ninveh, repentance is possible. We can become better. We can change our ways. Come Yom Kippur, we can arouse Hashem's mercy and be sealed for a good year. It is never too late. And Hashem is there to help us come closer to Him.

גמר חתימה טובה.