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From the Chaburah
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Teshuvah: Think Different

תשובה איז נישט דער טייטש בעסער ווערען, תשובה איז דער טייטש אנדערש ווערען
'Teshuvah' doesn't mean being better. 'Teshuvah' means becoming something different.

Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner attributes this aphorism to the *mussar* giants of previous generations (*Pachad Yitzchak*, *Rosh Hashanah*, chapter 29). The idea that *teshuvah* involves a radical transformation is found throughout Rambam's *Hilchot Teshuvah*:

Among the paths of repentance is for the penitent to constantly call out before God, crying and entreating; to perform charity according to his potential; to separate himself far from the object of his sin; to change his name, as if to say **"I am a different person and not the same one who sinned"** (*Hilchot Teshuvah* 2:4)

R' Hutner emphasizes the absolute break in a person's life that *teshuvah* accomplishes. When we separate ourselves from a sin and resolve not to do it again, we are "creating a split in our lives, we divide our lives into two halves. The first part of our lives existed before the *teshuvah*, and from the moment of *teshuvah* and on begins the second part of our lives." (ibid.) The amazing thing about *teshuvah* is that we're capable of accomplishing this kind of splitting and that Hashem accepts it. We are able to move forward from the moment of *teshuvah* on a new trajectory.

But what happens to the first part of our lives once *teshuvah* is complete? How should we relate to the years or decades that came before *teshuvah*?

Rabbi Yosef Dov Solovetichik (*Al Hateshuvah* pp 169-175) describes two approaches. Some *ba'alei teshuvah* "erase" the earlier years. They no longer identify with the drives, interests, and choices of their previous life. R' Soloveitchik writes about the outcomes of this approach:

I have seen *ba'alei teshuvah* who have done this. What happened to them? They became strangers and aliens to their families and those close to them. Those people appeared to them as though they belonged to a different era, a different incarnation, to a time in which they (the *ba'alei*

teshuvah) had been mired in sin, [a time] which they had now erased from their consciousness. Together with this they erased all the emotions and experiences connected with that era. It reached the point that these *ba'alei teshuvah* severed all connections with parents, children, brothers, and sisters. (translation by A.F.)

R' Soloveitchik identifies this approach as *teshuvah* out of fear. The Gemara (*Yoma* 86b) explains that this kind of *teshuvah* transforms wilful sins into *shbegagot* (mistakes). The ba'al *teshuvah* regrets their entire existence until the moment of *teshuvah*. They seek to be “born again” and begin a new life. Hashem accepts this, and regards the previous life as the ba'al *teshuvah* does, a mistake.

Erasing the past is necessary in some cases. Sometimes a person's sins were so great, and their personality so distorted that their past life threatens to undermine any attempt at future change. In these cases there may be no choice but to erase the past. However, R' Soloveitchik argues that in many, if not most, cases there is another option. In this approach the ba'al *teshuvah* doesn't erase their past, but rather elevates it. This kind of *teshuvah* “demands of a person not to return to the point of departure [from before they sinned]. Rather, it fills them with a powerful desire to come very very close to the Creator and reach a level that they never would have dreamed of achieving before they sinned.”

In this kind of *teshuvah*, a person uses the full breadth of their past experiences as part of the *teshuvah* transformation. They use their experience of sin and their understanding of the world to construct a unique spiritual persona. As a result, their past sins become, in retrospect, the building blocks of who they have become. This is what the Gemara (*ibid.*) calls *teshuvah* out of love. In this case, Hashem considers the ba'al *teshuvah*'s previous wilful sins as *zechuyot* (merits).

On Yom Kippur, Hashem says that He will only appear “within the cloud [of smoke]” (*Vayikra* 16:2) produced by burning the *ketoret* incense. The *ketoret* mixture had three principal ingredients: *netef*, *shechelet*, and *chelbanah*. *Chelbanah*, on its own, has a terrible smell. Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook (*Olat Ra'aya*, vol 1., 136) explains that it's included in the *ketoret* to demonstrate that nothing in the world is truly evil in its source. But this is not all. R' Kook explains that as the *chelbanah* interacts with the other two ingredients, it changes. The *netef* neutralizes the *chelbanah*'s bad smell. This symbolizes the possibility of neutralizing evil. The *shechelet* goes one step further and transforms the *chelbanah* into something that smells good in its own right. This symbolizes the transformation of evil into something good.

The two transformations of the *chelbanah* parallel our own opportunities for *teshuvah*, “erasing” past sins or transforming them into something greater. We must recognize the possibility for change that we all have. It's only within the potent, if hazy, vision of the people we can become that Hashem appears to us on Yom Kippur.

Gmar Chatimah Tovah!

Mishnah: A Philosophy of Life

By: Dovid Campbell

Yoma 1:1 — What's Worth Worrying About

How should we prepare for the uncertainties of the future? How should we meaningfully differentiate between precautions that are reasonable and those that are simply the outgrowths of our fears and insecurities? And when can those fears and insecurities sometimes become ideal motivators for better behavior? The first mishnah in tractate *Yoma* sheds light on all of these questions and offers some valuable lessons for turbulent times.

The mishnah teaches that a “stand-by” Kohen Gadol was appointed in case the primary Kohen Gadol became impure and unable to perform the Yom Kippur service. This seems to be a very reasonable precaution for a very possible and serious problem. Rebbe Yehudah then suggests an additional precaution: Since we learn that the Kohen Gadol must be married in order to perform his service, we should also prepare a second wife! After all, people sometimes die suddenly. This would also seem to be a reasonable precaution, but the sages reject Rebbe Yehudah's reasoning.

“If so,” they reply, “then the matter has no end!” If we are going to be concerned for the minute possibility of a sudden death, then adding another wife does not solve the issue, since maybe she will die as well. This response of the sages is somewhat puzzling. Certainly two sudden deaths are less likely than one, and adding a second wife will at least marginally improve the Kohen Gadol's chances of performing his service. Rebbe Yehudah might agree that the risk is small, but why not make this minimal effort to avoid an issue in the future?

The sages' response conveys an important principle. There are situations where extra precautions are warranted, but when it comes to unlikely scenarios, “freak accidents,” we should accept that some things are simply beyond our control. There is no meaningful value in reducing a risk from a 0.002% to a 0.001% probability. True, we can always do more to hedge our bets, but that is exactly the problem — we can always do more. Excessive precautions can quickly descend into neurosis.

Even the appointment of the second Kohen Gadol is not what it appears to be. As later *mishnayot* demonstrate, the sages enacted many practices to preserve the Kohen Gadol's purity. The chances of becoming impure were very minimal. Tosafot Yom Tov cites a Gemara that explains that the appointment of the stand-by was not really because of a concern for sudden contamination. Rather, it was a psychological ploy. The idea of being replaced would pain the Kohen Gadol and encourage him to be extra careful.

When the stakes are high, it can be tempting to take every precaution possible, and there are indeed times when it is appropriate to be more careful. But our mishnah reminds us that even simple precautions for major issues should be considered carefully when their value is doubtful. Sometimes, our desire for security can overshadow the exact thing that we hope to protect.

The Torah Reading for Yom Kippur Mincha — Why *Arayot*?

The Gemara (*Megillah* 31a) teaches that the Torah reading for Minchah of Yom Kippur is the passage in *Acharei Mot* detailing the various prohibitions of *arayot*, forbidden sexual relations. The Gemara itself does not explain the reason for this selection, and the commentators therefore search for a compelling connection between this passage and the holiest day of the Jewish year. Their unique approaches offer us valuable insights into the nature of Yom Kippur and the dynamic process of *teshuvah*.

Rashi appeals to the general theme of Yom Kippur as a day of atonement. Throughout the day, we attempt to remind ourselves of our spiritual shortcomings in the hope that we can atone for them. Since *arayot* are an unfortunately common category of transgression, Chazal thought they should receive special emphasis on Yom Kippur.

Tosafot asks us to consider the experience of Yom Kippur itself. Since it is customary for women to adorn themselves in honor of the holy day, Chazal established this Torah reading as a warning. Even on Yom Kippur, a person can easily be seduced by what he sees.

Tosafot also cite a midrashic explanation that views the Torah reading as a type of prayer. Just as Hashem commanded us not to expose the nakedness of certain individuals, so too we ask Hashem not to expose the “nakedness” of our transgressions.

Teshuvah is unique in its ability to reframe both our past and our future. Through wholehearted regret, we recontextualize past mistakes and transform them into a foundation for growth. Through profound conviction, we imbue our future with a new spiritual vision. Rashi's explanation focuses on *teshuvah* as it relates to past deeds, while Tosafot's first explanation highlights the commitment we must maintain going forward. Both aspects are necessary for true *teshuvah*.

Tosafot's midrashic explanation brings the concept of *teshuvah* into the present moment, the unique spiritual atmosphere of Yom Kippur. On the surface, the argument put forward by the midrash is perplexing. It seems to imply that it would be somehow inconsistent for Hashem to both prohibit *arayot* and also reveal the nakedness of our sins. But how are these things comparable? Why should being prohibited in *arayot* mean that we get special consideration in judgment?

It may help to remember that the laws of *arayot* are *chukim*; they are not demanded by human reason, and we know that many Jews before *matan Torah* had relationships that would later be defined as *arayot*. Additionally, throughout Jewish history, halachic categories like *agunot* and *mamzerim* have yielded painful realities for countless Jews. And yet, the Jewish people have accepted and upheld these laws like all others, setting aside their own ideas and feelings out of their love for Hashem. Correspondingly, on Yom Kippur, we ask that Hashem set aside strict judgment out of His love for us.