

The Month of Tishrei:

Reconnecting the Dispersed Pieces of our Personal Puzzle

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Moving Deeper into *Teshuvah* – Returning to Our Inner Core

As we move from Elul to Tishrei, we move deeper into *teshuvah* and deeper into ourselves. Adam was created on Rosh Hashanah and ate from the Tree the very day he was created – on Rosh Hashanah! Rav Kook explains that eating from the Tree was not so much a sin against Hashem than it was a betrayal of self (Rav Kook, *Orot HaKodesh* 3, p. 140). When Adam and Eve accepted the opinion of the snake, they lost themselves. Rather than tuning into their inner truth where mind and heart becomes one, they listened to the serpent. Eating from the fruit of the Tree of Good and Evil – the Tree of Uncertainty – they brought the uncertainty of the world into their very being. As the juice flooded into their mouth upon the first bite, Adam and Eve tasted the loss of their core certainty of being. Since then it has become natural for people to depend greatly on other people’s opinion rather than listening to their own inner voice. *Teshuvah* is about returning to our inner core – our inner source where we feel connected with the greater whole. Eating from the Tree caused division in the world. Our work in this world is to reconnect the dispersed pieces of our personal puzzle. This is redemption on a personal level. When we tune inwards in meditative living we become magnetic to the fragmented pieces of our soul. On a practical level this may imply taking time to be alone with ourselves and our souls, away from everyone else’s noisy clatter. A nature walk alone with the trees, herbs and bird-song may do wonders for reconnecting and centering ourselves. At these times it may be helpful to talk a little less with others while listening in and becoming more aware of who we really are and where we are headed.

Minimizing like the Moon

In our time of information overload, uncertainty and confusion, we often look to others to affirm selfhood. When our self-worth is dependent on what others think of us, rather than our Divine source within, then we are continuing and repeating the sin of eating from the Tree of External Knowledge while losing internal selfhood. This loss of self is reflected in the moon’s question: “How can two kings share one crown?” (*Babylonian Talmud, Chulin* 60b). The moon’s question is only a question in the external world of rank and competition where we compare ourselves to one another. In the internal world everything is possible, and when we fulfill our personal potential, we are all kings and heads rather than tails, as the Rosh Hashana Seder affirms. Eating from the Tree of Knowledge affected even the earth, which became afraid to actualize its full potential that Hashem had imbued within it to produce fruit trees that produced fruits, where the tree shared the taste of the fruit (*Bereishit* 1:11), rather than just bitter trees that produced sweet fruit (*Bereishit* 1:12). When we are concerned about what people think about us, then we lose the ability to go all the way and act with our full heart (*Midrash Rabbah, Ruth* 5:6). Through fear and concern of what people may say, we cause ourselves to be minimized like the moon.

Returning to the Root of Our Soul

The days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are focused on returning the lost light of the moon, and unifying at the inner point that precedes contrast and counter point – jealousy and competition, where two kings can share one crown. We recite the *Avinu Malkeinu* prayer, requesting: “*Our Father our King! Return us in complete teshuvah before You!*” When is *teshuvah* full and complete? This question can be better understood in light of the request that immediately follows: “*Our Father our King! Send complete healing to the sick of Your people.*” What is ‘complete healing?’ Often we are only able to alleviate the external symptoms. The true source of the illness, however, remains unknown or untreatable. Such a treatment is only a partial healing. When we plead for complete healing, we are praying that we may succeed in discovering the source of the illness, become completely cured in full restoration of perfect health. The same concept applies to *teshuvah*. If we address a particular fault, we are really dealing with a symptom of a much larger problem. Correcting a specific sin is only partial *teshuvah*. When we ask for G-d’s help in attaining complete *teshuvah*, we seek a comprehensive *teshuvah* that corrects the root source of our various character flaws resulting from estrangement of self. Such a complete *teshuvah* will restore our spiritual wholeness and return us to ourselves. As Rav Kook writes, “When we forget the nature of our *ani ha’atzmi* – our authentic soul, when we ignore the call to enter into the inner life of our self, everything gets hazy and full of doubt. The primary *teshuvah* which immediately illuminates the darkness is that a person returns to himself, to the root of his soul, and he will at once return to G-d – the soul of all souls. He will continue to step forwards in the higher levels of holiness and purity” (*Orot HaTeshuvah* 15:10).

Returning to Our Authentic Essential Selves

Dr. Yehudah Gelman explains how according to Rav Kook there exist two kinds of *teshuvah*. Most people focus on the lower *teshuvah* which is reflected in correct actions in the realm of Halacha. Rav Kook emphasizes the importance of the higher *teshuvah* reflected in correct mindset – in being connected with our higher selves. It is a state of being – a state of perception, in which everything is perceived in its unifying nature. The lower *teshuvah* is how we operate in the world, whereas the higher *teshuvah* is about connecting to our essence, to our highest soul – our *yechidah* – our all-inclusive individuality, unified with the universal Divinity. In order to come to our essential *teshuvah* (higher *teshuvah*), we may increase thoughts and meditation, thereby decreasing actions even in learning Torah. Yet, the Torah we learned will thereby be processed on a deeper level. By increasing the richness of our imagination, we may thereby decrease our active aspect of life. This is necessary essentially in order to purify our insides – in order to remain refined, purified and truly free. All this pertains to the higher *teshuvah* – the *teshuvah* of essential self (*Orot HaTeshuvah* 16:11).

The Pitfalls of Lower *Teshuvah* and Religious Snobbishness

One of the pitfalls of the lower *teshuvah* is that it creates division among us. It is about finding our place and keeping the boundaries strong, defending them against outsiders.

Lower *teshuvah* disconnected from higher *teshuvah* is completely defined by categorization. Therefore, it emphasizes those particulars which divide between the different segments of people. When we do lower *teshuvah*, we define ourselves through how we are different and 'better' than others. For example through eating more strictly kosher, only holding by certain *hechshers*, being more *tzniut* than others, covering our hair better, having longer *peot*, a bigger *kipah* etc. The negative consequences of this kind of lower *teshuvah* are expressed in kind of a religious snobbishness – being intolerant of those who wear a different kind of hat. When it comes to lower *teshuvah*, those mitzvot which don't play a particular role in defining the different categories go by the way side, no matter how much value they may have. Those values which do not define of one group as opposed to another, lose their significance, since they are not important in determining where I belong, and where you belong. Therefore, there is for example no Jewish category that defines itself by not throwing paper down the floor, or being kind to animals. Those aren't the defining characteristics. The great threat to the lower *teshuvah* is to lose our place, to return to the world of chaos, of confusion, of cross-categories, of not understanding that a Jew is a Jew and you are a Jew, a goy is a goy and you are not a goy. Lower *teshuvah* detached from higher *teshuvah* thus may express rigid social demarcation, and a rigid authoritarian structure, which represents its degeneration.

Higher Teshuvah: Rather than, "I Live," "It Lives in Me"

To return in higher *teshuvah* is to expand the conception of self – recognizing in a certain sense the unboundedness of the self. It is to realize the openness of the self, that the self is not an enclosure by its very nature. It is not bounded, it is not some kind of cage which's lock must be checked and double checked before you go to bed at night. Upper *teshuvah* is like a flower which opens to the morning sun, opening to all reality, and realizing that oneness of my existence with the Divine. I, as a human being, am a unique intersection of Divine forces at a particular place and time of history of the world. To be in higher *teshuvah* is to experience our life as Divine energy flowing through us. We cannot say in higher *teshuvah* "I live," but rather, "It lives in me." Or we say, "I am lived." When we are in higher *teshuvah* we feel that we are the ground upon which the Divine breaks out into reality and is revealed. Higher *teshuvah* is return to our root, to our true and deep self – to our true nature in the order of being. Higher *teshuvah* knows no strong dichotomies in essence between the physical and the spiritual, between the holy and the secular, between man and woman, Jew and gentile, even between human and animal. Therefore, higher *teshuvah* which is not anchored in lower *teshuvah* can be dangerous in its all-inclusive tolerance and lack of boundaries.

Golden Apples of higher *Teshuvah* within Silver Settings of Lower *Teshuvah*

We must learn to operate in both realms simultaneously. Our head can soar in the highest heaven of the upper *teshuvah* as long as our feet are firmly planted in the ground of lower *teshuvah*. Even as we delight in higher *teshuvah* we must remember that we live in the physical world governed by the boundaries of Halacha. Although it may feel – oh so spiritual – to turn on music on Shabbat, or let down our hair from the constriction of its covering, with strong *emunah* we nevertheless do our best to keep all the Divine rules to their very detail. Even if the practical pragmatic distinctions

to be made between holy and profane, spiritual and material, man and woman do not reveal the true nature of reality, they still need to be kept in this lower world, while serving as a springboard towards higher consciousness of the ultimate reality where they no longer will be relevant. As the *geulah* (redemption) draws closer there is an increased yearning for the higher realms beyond boundaries, and some of us, in our desire for spirituality and Divine connection, may forget to fit in the nitty gritty details of halacha which may seem so intolerant and limiting. Others build walls of protection around our sanctuary of righteousness, judging our fellow Jews by the height of their neckline and length of their sleeves. Through our shield of intolerance we may be missing out on welcoming uninitiated outsiders in true *ahavat yisrael* (love of all Israel). The correct balance between upper and lower *teshuvah* can be compared to "apples of gold in filigree settings of silver" (*Mishley* 25:11). Within the silver settings of the lower *teshuvah* visible in the physical world shines the specks of golden apples from the realm of the higher *teshuvah*.

May we merit returning to Hashem, each-other and ourselves in *teshuvah sheleima*, which includes the correct balance between both higher and lower *teshuvah*! גמר חתימה טובה!
May we all be sealed in the book of life in both the upper and lower world!