

The Month of Tishrei:

How is *Teshuvah* on Yom Kippur Different than on all Other Days?

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha Siegelbaum

The Gift of Yom Kippur

I used to think that Yom Kippur was a sad day – a day of fasting and abstinence from all pleasures (*Vayikra* 16:31). In truth, Yom Kippur is the greatest gift Hashem ever has bestowed upon the Jewish people. One day a year He gives us the opportunity to wipe our slate clean and erase all the misspelled scribbles of the year. All we have to do is apply that eraser called teshuvah. The Talmud teaches that there were never days as happy as Tub Av and Yom Kippur when the daughters of Jerusalem would go out in white dresses and dance in the vineyards, asking the young men to choose a wife from among them (*Mishnah Ta’anit* 4:8). Could it be that just as Tu b’Av is a day dedicated to love, so is Yom Kippur? We all know that first and foremost Yom Kippur is a day dedicated to teshuvah. Rashi explains from the language “but” – “But on the tenth of the seventh month is *Yom HaKippurim* (Day of Atonement)” (*Vayikra* 23:27), that atonement is contingent upon teshuvah. This sounds like a gift with strings attached! Well, all the nicest gifts are artfully wrapped with bows and ties. Just as you need to open the wrapping in order to receive and access the gift, we must earn our gift of *kaparah* (atonement) by means of earnest teshuvah. Without employing ourselves in teshuvah, the gift of Yom Kippur may pass us by unopened. So how do we do this teshuvah so vital for the success of our yearly spiritual detox? Aren’t we supposed to always engage in teshuvah? Then how is teshuvah on Yom Kippur different from teshuvah throughout the year? Please read on as I will b”H shed light on these questions through the teachings of Rabbis Raphael Luria and Shlomo Carlibach.

Teshuvah during the Year

Actually according to the Rambam there is no explicit mitzvah to do teshuvah during the year. The only part of teshuvah which is continually mandatory thought-out the year is *vidui* (confession). Note the language of Rambam: “If a person transgressed any of the mitzot of the Torah whether unintentionally or intentionally, when he does teshuvah and repents from his sin he is obligated to confess before G-d as it states, “A man or a woman if they transgress... they must confess their transgression that they committed...” (*Bamidbar* 5:6-7), (Rambam, *Hilchot Teshuvah* 1:1). Why would the Torah not obligate us to repent during the year except on Yom Kippur? The truth is that not all of us are capable to fully repent except for on Yom Kippur. Hashem, therefore, would never give us a mitzvah or any challenge which supersedes our capacity. When a person sins, his heart becomes blocked, as it states, “one sin leads to another” (*averah goreret averah*) (*Pirkei Avot* 4:2). The only kind of teshuvah which is still open for him during the year is incomplete teshuvah – teshuvah from fear of punishment. This lower kind of teshuvah is mentioned in the Torah in *Parashat Nitzavim*, which we read the Shabbat preceding Rosh Hashana. There it states, “You will return until (עַד אֲשֶׁר אֵלֶיךָ/ad Hashem)” (*Devarim* 30:2) in a partial teshuvah – “until Hashem” but not yet cleaving to Hashem. This complete teshuvah of cleaving to Hashem only appears in the continuation of the section as a description of what will happen at the end of days after Hashem

will circumcise our heart and thus unblock it. Only then will we return into (אֱלֹהֵינוּ/el Hashem) our G-d with all our heart and all our soul (*Devarim* 30:10). This kind of teshuvah is available to every Jew once a year on Yom Kippur, when Hashem unblock our heart and help us to purify ourselves from the קליפות/klipot (shells) as it states, "...You shall purify yourself before Hashem" (*Vayikra* 16:30).

Teshuvah from Fear versus Teshuvah from Love

Yet, on Yom Kippur all the doors open to each and every Jews, to return to Hashem with a full heart, not only through fear but through pure love. This is the kind of teshuvah with which we can rewrite our past and turn our sins into shining mitzvot (*Babylonian Talmud, Yoma* 86b). Through teshuvah from fear, which motivates many of us during most of the year, we think about what will happen to us after death. Yet, teshuvah from love is about feeling an earnest desire to bask in Hashem's light. Thus, King David had only one request, "...to sit in the house of Hashem all the days of my life, and behold the gracious sweetness of Hashem... (*Tehillim* 27:4). On Yom Kippur we are all lifted up to experience this sweetness. On this holiest day of the year a special light of *chesed* illuminates our *da'at* to contemplate on the greatness and importance of Israel standing before Hashem. The illumination of unity between all of Israel with ourselves, each other and Hashem inspires us to feel immense regret in our heart that we became distanced from the light of the face of the living King (Based on Rabbi Rephael Luria, *Ori v'Yishi, Yamim Noraim* pp. 265-268). When we return in teshuvah together on Yom Kippur we can reach the greatest place of love – then love of Hashem and love of Israel becomes one. Perhaps this is why the daughters of Jerusalem would dance in white unifying dresses on Yom Kippur and look to find grace in the eyes of their beloved soul-mate.

Overcoming Judgment through Teshuvah from Love

Rav Shlomo Carlebach explains the difference between teshuvah from fear and teshuvah from love as follows: When we do teshuvah from fear we focus on the sins we committed and the mitzvot we neglected to keep, whereas teshuvah from love is about drawing the gracious sweetness of Hashem upon us. Through teshuvah from fear we lack love of all our fellow Jews in our heart. We may do teshuvah and start keeping Shabbat immaculately, yet avoid saying Shabbat Shalom to those old friends who don't yet keep Shabbat. This would never happen if we did teshuvah from love. The reason for this is that when we do teshuvah out of love and become so close to Hashem, then we get filled with light and happiness. We become so thankful to Hashem that we merited to know how a Jew is supposed to keep Shabbat. Then when we see another Jew who doesn't yet know how to keep Shabbat, our heart goes out in pain for him. We don't hate him, we only feel badly for him. We tell ourselves, "How I wish that he will also merit this closeness to Hashem. How I wish that all of Israel would merit this!" Yet, if I didn't truthfully and with my whole heart want to keep Shabbat, but I do it out of fear, out of obligation. Then when I see another Jew who doesn't keep Shabbat, I actually become jealous of him, and hate him. Because deep down I'm angry that I can't have fun like him on Shabbat (Rav Shlomo Carlibach, *Lev Hashamayim* pp.144-145).

This Rosh Hashana, we held a grand Seder hosting 22 people. As we went around the table sharing what we wanted to shed and what we wanted to take on this year, a recurrent theme was the desire to let go of judgment. So many of us seem to be working unsuccessfully on this for so long. When I read the above Torah from Rav Shlomo I finally understood why it's so hard to stop judging others "who are not on our level" of mitzvah observance. Since many of us are keeping the mitzvot out of obligation – without the deepest devotional commitment of love, we cover our subconscious jealousy of our 'frei' friend from ourselves in layers of judgment. On Yom Kippur we have the ability to rise to a place of infinite love beyond judgments and division. Let us together reach the highest place of the sweetest light of unified purity beyond religious hierarchy!

G'mar Chatimah tovah to all of us!

May we be sealed in the Book of Gracious Life!