

BS"D

It's Yom Kippur. Re-Create Yourself

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So here we are again. 25 hours of no eating, no anointing, no sandals, etc.. 25 hours, most of which, we will spend together in this house. What are we doing here?

In a word – creation/yetzira.

According to RS, teshuva is really about creating, or re-creating (yetzira mehadash) the self (the "I"). And furthermore, atonement/kapara is really ancillary (shuli) to this essential process of yetzira mehadash.

Now, while I am aware that the Rav's understanding of teshuva is known to many of you [and if I remember correctly, J. Wolf touched on this last year], permit me to paraphrase the famous opening words of Mesillat Yesharim: I have not come to teach you what you do not know but to remind you of what you already know ... in order that you take to heart the duty that you tend to overlook. וישים על ליבו חובתו אשר הוא מתעלם ממנה

Let's review (nachzor) together RS' chapter on teshuva in Halachic Man.

Repentance, according to the halachic view, is an act of creation - self-creation. The severing of one's psychic identity with one's previous "I" and the creation of a new "I", possessor of a new consciousness, a new heart and spirit, different desires, longing, goals – this is the meaning of that repentance compounded of regret over the past and resolve for the future.

תשובה, על פי ההשקפה ההלכתית, היא מעשה של יצירה - יצירה עצמית. ניתוק הזהות הנפשית של האדם עם ה"אני" הקודם, ויצירתו של ה"אני" החדש, בעל תודעה חדשה, ולב ורוח חדשים, עם תשוקות, געגועים, ויעדים שונים - זו משמעות החזרה בתשובה...

To appreciate the depth of this revolutionary outlook on teshuva we must realize what the normative view of teshuva is. The Rav explains this view in the name of "homo religiosus":

[Homo religiosus] views repentance only from the perspective of atonement, only as a guard against punishment, an empty regret which does not create anything, does not bring into being anything new. [By "empty" the Rav does not impugn the regret of being insincere but simply of no value since it doesn't affect anything – it is simply remorse for remorse's sake.] ... He mourns for the yesterdays that are irretrievably past, the times that have long since sunk into the

abyss of oblivion, the deeds that have vanished like shadows, facts he will never be able to change. Therefore, for homo religiosus, repentance is a wholly miraculous phenomenon made possible by the endless grace of the Almighty.

הומו רליגיוסוס רואה תשובה רק מנקודת מבט של כפרה, רק כתריס מפני העונש, [תשובה עבורו היא] חרטה ריקה אשר לא יוצרת שום דבר, ולא מביאה שום דבר חדש. [על ידי "ריקה" הרב אינו תוקף את... החרטה כצבוע אלא פשוט רק מעריך כי היא לא משפיע על שום דבר - זה פשוט חרטה לשם חרטה.] ... הוא [הומו רליגיוסוס] מתאבל על הימים שחלפו שאי אפשר להשיגם שוב, על הזמנים שכבר מזמן שקעו בתהום הנשייה, על המעשים שנעלמו כמו צללים, ועל העובדות שלעולם לא יוכל לשנות. לכן, עבור הומו רליגיוסוס, תשובה היא תופעה נסית לחלוטין שמתאפשרת אך ורק על ידי החסד האינסופי של הקב"ה.

I can attest (le'ha'id) that this certainly was my understanding and approach to teshuva in those first YK's after becoming religious. My understanding was that this was a time to review past deeds – e.g., eating cheeseburgers – and simply express remorse (harata) and hope and pray that God would grant me selicha, mechila and kapara. The Rav explains that this approach is totally fallacious.

The Rav goes on to explain Halachic man's teshuva:

Halachic man does not indulge in weeping and despair, does not lacerate his flesh or flail away at himself. He does not afflict himself with penitential rites and forgoes all mortification of body and soul. Halachic man is engaged in self-creation, in creating a new "I."

איש ההלכה אינו נוהג בבכי וייאוש, אינו חותך את בשרו או מצליף את עצמו. הוא אינו מענה את עצמו בטקסי חרטה, והוא מוותר על כל הסתגפויות למיניהם. איש ההלכה עוסק ביצירה עצמית, ביצירת ה"אני" החדש.

So this begs a couple of questions:

- (1) What are we doing today with these 5 inuyim of YK? The Rav does not address this question but I would offer that we are not engaging in mortifications for the sake of punishing ourselves like homo religiosus but rather attempting to emulate God in this moment where we are attempting to be creators of our new selves. We divest ourselves of physical entrapments to raise ourselves to the realm of spiritual creators.
- (2) The big question, and the great hidush, that stands at the center of the Rav's approach is; How? How are we to recreate ourselves through teshuva? That is, given that we cannot change the past, we are who we are and recreation of the self is not possible.

To refute (lehafrich) this view, the Rav employs the idea of German Philosopher Max Scheler. The Rav explains that there is physical time and there is spiritual time. Physical

time is unidirectional such that the past is “no more” (lo od) and the future is “not yet” (od lo); there is cause in the past (siba) and effect in the future (totzaah). But spiritual time is different. Spiritual time entertains past, present and future simultaneously (bozmanit)! He explains as follows:

The future imprints its stamp on the past and determines its image. ... The past by itself is indeterminate, a closed book. It is only the present and the future that can pry it open and read its meaning. There are many different paths, according to this perspective, along which the cause can travel. It is the future that determines its direction and points the way.

העתיד מטביע את חותמו על העבר וקובע את דימויו. ... העבר כשלעצמו אינו מוגדר, [הוא] כספר סגור. רק ההווה והעתיד יכולים לפתוח אותו ולקרוא את משמעותו. יש דרכים רבות ושונות, על פי נקודת מבט זו, שבה הסיבה יכולה לנסוע. העתיד הוא שקובע את הכיוון...

That is, though an act in the past generally fixes the consequence in the future, in spiritual terms, the future can imply the meaning of the past act.

As an example. Yes, I ate cheeseburgers, in my past. But that past is not some lost time for which I can only regret and beg for mercy before God. NO! It is a past that has yet to be interpreted. If I choose to now open a cheeseburger restaurant and davka buy kosher meat and kosher cheese to ensure that everyone is oveir d'oraita - so that makes my past have a certain meaning. On the other hand, I can choose to not eat cheeseburgers any more, and furthermore, tell people that even though cheeseburgers are very tasty (te'imim) (and I remember that a number of people asked me not to say this in public since it is tempting, nevertheless, I bring this example because really), there is nothing more tasty (taim) than fulfilling purpose (lekayeim tachlit); and that in the scheme of our short lives on this earth (mi'mabat al shel ha hayim haketzartzarim shelanu – afilu 120 shanim), the taste of eternity cannot be beat (letaam shel netzach ain lo tacharut). In this I have completely changed my past and I have created myself anew. True I have the past that was my past, but now it has a completely different meaning.

This, explains the Rav, is what Reish Lakish meant when he taught

תלמוד בבלי מסכת יומא דף פו עמוד ב

אמר ריש לקיש: גדולה תשובה שזדונות נעשות לו כזכיות

The cheeseburger has become a vehicle to fulfill the will of God.

And this, explains the Rav, is what R. Abahu meant when he taught

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף לד עמוד ב

דאמר רבי אבהו: מקום שבעלי תשובה עומדין - צדיקים גמורים אינם עומדין,

But we are all BT's in this sense. We all have things in our past that could be better, could be changed, could be reread in a light of a better future direction.

Two more points to close:

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(1) WHOLISTIC APPROACH

There is another important point for us here that R. Y. Blau notes underpins the Rav's approach to teshuva and that is that our teshuva must be viewed as wholistic. He brings Christian scholar William Douglas Chamberlain who explains:

The difference in the two views lies in the fact that the Reformers place emphasis on the transformation of the whole mind, heart and will of man, while the Catholic view tends to leave the emphasis on the penitential practices of the sinner seeking pardon. In the latter view [i.e., the Catholics], the woods cannot be seen for the trees: men lose their sense of sin in their preoccupation with sins. This restricts repentance to the particulars when it was intended to touch every phase of life, thought and aspiration.

ההבדל בין שתי ההשקפות [הקתולים והרפורמים] טמון בכך שהרפורמים שמים דגש על טרנספורמצית המוח, הלב והרצון באופן כולל, בעוד שהשקפת הקתולית נוטה להשאיר את הדגש על מנהגים של חרטה של החוטא המחפש חנינה. בתפיסה השנייה (כלומר, הקתולית), מרוב עצים לא רואים את היער, כך שאנשים מאבדים את חוש החטא שלהם מרוב העיסוק בחטאים. תפיסה זו מגבילה את החזרה בתשובה לפרטי פרטים כאשר היא נועדת לגעת בכל צד בחיים, מחשבה ושאיפה.

What he is saying is critical for us standing at the outset of YK. We are about to go through long lists of particular sins and it is right to do so. However, let us not lose sight of the forest for the trees. We are trying to affect a wholistic change, we are trying recreate our very beings. We must take on as our overarching theme for the day to change ourselves, to be our better selves. (חייבים לראות את עצמינו במיטבנו). And with this we drill down to the details (leredet lepratum).

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(2) KAPARA

And finally, it is critical to note that the actual achievement of atonement/kapara is, according to the Rav:

“only a peripheral aspect of repentance.”

כפרה היא רק היבט שולי של תהליך התשובה

The desire to be another person, to be different than I am now, is the central motif of repentance.

הרצון להיות אדם אחר, להיות שונה ממה שאני עכשיו, הוא המוטיב המרכזי של התשובה.

That is, the primary concern of teshuva is to create ourselves anew. That we achieve kapara is consequence that w of course very much want to take place, but that is not our focus. R. Blau explains the Rav's idea as follows:

Though man may call upon Divine benevolence to achieve atonement, he acts on his own in order to deserve that bestowal of kindness.

על אף שאדם יכול לבקש חסד אלוקי כדי להשיג כפרה, הוא פועל בעצמאות להיות ראוי להענקת חסד זה.

TO CONCLUDE

We have 25 hours.

25 hours, not to mourn an irretrievable past and wait passively for God's gracious kapara; but 25 hours to recreate ourselves, to reflect on how we can become our better selves, transforming the past in the light of the great people we are meant to be.

We are to look at our past deeds in order to abandon them. To use them as a lever (manof) to a better self.

And as a result, may God indeed grant us Selicha, Mechila and Kapara.