

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Vayelech

Understanding the Mitzvah of Teshuvah

וַאֲמַר בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא הֲלֹא עַל כִּי אֵין אֱלֹהֵי בְּקִרְבִּי מִצְאוּנֵי הָרָעוֹת הָאֵלֶּה. וְאֶנְכִּי הִסְתַּר אֶסְתִּיר פְּנֵי
בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא עַל כֹּל הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה כִּי פָּנָה אֶל אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים.

He will say on that day, "Is it not because my God is not in my midst that these evils have befallen me?" And I will surely conceal My face on that day because of all the evil that he did, for he had turned to gods of others (31:17-18)

Many mefarshim are troubled by an evident difficulty within these pesukim:

- ▶ The first pasuk appears to express sentiments of teshuvah on the part of the Jewish People – recognizing that evil has befallen them in account of Hashem not being in their midst. This being the case, why does the next pasuk state that Hashem will hide His face from them? Surely their teshuvah should effect a response that contains some measure of Divine compassion!

TESHUVAH AS A SEPARATE MITZVAH

The Meshech Chochmah prefaces his approach to this matter by asking a most basic question regarding the mitzvah of teshuvah, namely, how much of teshuvah actually represents a separate and distinct mitzvah? The simple understanding of teshuvah is that it comprises a person bettering his ways and correcting past mistakes. However, the obligation to do all this does not require a new mitzvah called "Teshuvah," it is simply a function of the mitzvos themselves. If a person has been lax in matters of Shabbos, *kashrus* or *lashon hara*, the requirement to correct those faults derives from the mitzvos of Shabbos, *kashrus* and *lashon hara*! The very same mitzvos that continually obligate someone who has been abiding by them likewise command someone who has been avoiding them. As such, he is fully obligated to better his ways even if there were to be no separate mitzvah called teshuvah! What, then, does the mitzvah of teshuvah introduce and entail?

THE FIRST CHIDDUSH - VIDUI

According to the Meshech Chochmah, there two answers to this question. The first new element introduced by the mitzvah of teshuvah beyond the standing obligation to correct

one's ways is *vidui* – the requirement to confess one's sins before Hashem and ask for forgiveness. This idea is set forth explicitly in the Rambam's opening words to *hilchos Teshuvah*:

כשיעשה תשובה וישוב מהטאון, חייב להתודות לפני השי"ת, שנאמר, "והתודו את הטאתם אשר עשו"

When a person does Teshuvah and returns from his sin, he is obligated to confess before Hashem, as it says,¹ "And they shall confess their sin that they committed."

We note that the Rambam codifies the obligation of Teshuvah as specifically that of *vidui*, citing as his source a pasuk which mentions this obligation. The returning from sin itself is mentioned by the Rambam as the prelude to this obligation, but that return is not the fulfillment of the mitzvah of Teshuvah, rather, it is the fulfillment of whatever mitzvah – or mitzvos – the person had been neglecting or violating. The position of the Rambam in this matter is followed by the Sefer Hachinuch.²

THE SECOND CHIDDUSH – RESTORATIVE MEASURES

There is another element of Teshuvah that relates to the fulfillment of the mitzvos themselves, but is nonetheless not included in the obligations commanded by those mitzvos. The Rambam³ presents an analogy in the area of physical wellbeing, whereby if one's constitution has become imbalanced in a certain direction, the way to correct this state is to initially overbalance in the other direction, until one's equilibrium can thus be restored. Similarly, if one has "lost his balance" with regards to mitzvos, part of the corrective process is to tend in the direction of the other extreme. For example, if he has given in to his desires in matters which are forbidden, part of restoring his spiritual equilibrium is to abstain even from matters which are permitted until he can regain his balance. Indeed, this restorative process is indicated by the term "Teshuvah," which refers to "restoring" the person to his original spiritual disposition.

TESHUVAH FOR AVODAH ZARAH

The idea that teshuvah brings with it two specific "new" elements, mentioned above, is true for almost all mitzvos – with one exception. Teshuvah for the sin of *avodah zarah* involves only the first element – *vidui*, but not the second – corrective measures. The reason for this is that the prohibition against *avodah zarah* is so all-encompassing it doesn't leave any permitted area the avoidance of which would represent "the other extreme"! As such, the eradication of even the slightest trace of a tendency toward *avodah zarah* would still be covered by the prohibition against *avodah zarah* itself and could not be considered an act of Teshuvah.⁴ Hence, in the sin of *avodah zarah*, the only new element introduced by the mitzvah of Teshuvah is that of *vidui*.

1 Bamidbar 5:7.

2 Mitzvah 364.

3 Shemonah Perakim perek 4 and Hilchos De'os 2:2.

4 The Meshech Chochmah suggests that this is similarly the reason behind Chazal's exhortation that a person strive to attain a state of extreme humility (Pirkei Avos 4:4) and likewise to avoid haughtiness entirely (Sotah 5a). Since the trait of haughtiness can lead a person to *avodah zarah*, as described in the Torah (see Devarim 8:12-19), even a trace of it is unacceptable.

UNDERSTANDING HOW PASUK 18 IS A RESPONSE TO PASUK 17

With all this in mind, the Meshech Chochmah addresses himself to our pesukim. The background to the situation is described in pasuk 16:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה... וְקָם הָעָם הַזֶּה וְזָנָה אַחֲרֵי אֱלֹהֵי נְכַר הָאָרֶץ... וְעִזְבוּנִי וְהִפְרֹת אֶת בְּרִיתִי אֲשֶׁר כָּרַתִּי אִתּוֹ

Hashem said to Moshe, "...This people will rise up and stray after the gods of the foreigners of the Land... and it will forsake Me and annul My covenant that I have sealed with it"

The pasuk has made mention first of the specific aveirah of *avodah zarah* and then refers generally to the Jewish People "forsaking Hashem's covenant" – a reference to the other *aveiros* of the Torah. In response to all of this, pasuk 17 states that Hashem's anger will be directed toward the people and He will hide His face from them, leaving them susceptible to all manner of calamities. The pasuk proceeds to state that in response to this the people will state:

הֲלֹא עַל כִּי אֵין אֱלֹהֵי בְּקִרְבִּי מִצְאוּנֵי הָרָעוֹת הָאֵלֶּה

Is it not because my God is not in my midst that these evils have befallen me?

What are the anticipated effects of this statement?

It is clear from numerous pesukim, as well as statements of Chazal, that Teshuvah has the capacity to bring one closer to Hashem and His protection; as Hoshea exhorts in the opening words to the Haftarah for Shabbos Shuvah: "שׁוּבוּהָ יִשְׂרָאֵל עַד ה' אֱלֹהֵיךָ" – *Return, O Yisrael, to Hashem, your God!*⁵ As we have seen, teshuvah consists specifically of two components: *vidui* and corrective measures. Each of these by itself has the capacity to effect a partial outcome of bringing the person closer to Hashem – with the full effect coming from the combination of both components. As such, the question we need to ask is: Does the statement of recognition mentioned in our pasuk ("*Is it not because my God is not in my midst etc.*") represent either component of teshuvah?

The answer, says Meshech Chochmah is, yes, it represents the component of corrective measures that accompany this recognition. However, it is not a statement of *vidui*, for it is written in the third person, "My God is not in my midst," while *vidui*, by definition, is addressed directly to Hashem and would state "Is it not because **You** are not in my midst." As we have seen, corrective measures are only considered an act of teshuvah with relation to general *aveiros*, not when it comes to *avodah zarah*. As such, pasuk 17 contains a statement which is considered teshuvah for all those *aveiros* barring *avodah zarah*.

What, then, are the effects of this statement?

Seeing as the people have done an act of teshuvah for almost all *aveiros*, this will mitigate against concealment of the *Shechinah* brought about by those *aveiros*. In this respect, the declaration in pasuk 17 **will** effect a positive outcome. There will, however, remain an element of concealment on account of the one aveirah for which no teshuvah has yet been done – *avodah zarah*, and it is this element specifically that is described in pasuk 18, which says:

5 See also Rambam, Hilchos Teshuvah 7:6.

וְאֲנֹכִי הִסְתַּר אֶסְתִּיר פָּנַי בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא עַל כָּל הַרְעָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה כִּי פָּנָה אֶל אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים

And I will surely conceal My face on that day because of all the evil that he did, for he had turned to gods of others.

This element of *hester panim* will persist until the people treat the aveirah of *avodah zarah* with the only component of Teshuvah that applies to it, namely, *vidui*, at which stage the *hester panim* will be removed completely.

Indeed, the Meshech Chochmah adds that this theme is included in Hoshea's opening exhortation to the people in our Haftarah, for the sin he is referring to there is specifically that of *avodah zarah*. Thus, he says:

קְחוּ עִמָּכֶם דְּבָרִים וְשׁוּבוּ אֵל ה' אֱמָרוּ אֵלָיו כֹּל תַּשָּׂא עֵין וְקַח טוֹב... וְלֹא נֹאמַר עוֹד אֱלֹהֵינוּ לְמַעֲשֵׂה יָדֵינוּ

Take words with you and return to Hashem; say to Him: "May You forgive all iniquity and accept good (vidui)... and we will no longer say 'Our gods' to the work of our hands (avodah zarah)"

May we merit over the coming days to treat each mistake with teshuvah in full measure and may this bring us, together with the entire world, closer to Hashem and the glow of His Shechinah.

גמר חתימה טובה!