

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Rosh Hashanah

Rosh Hashanah and the Leg of the Letter Heh

BACKGROUND: EXITS AND ENTRIES

The first word we hear from the Chazzan on Rosh Hashanah morning is “המלך – the King,” which is sung with a special melody. According to some commentators, the goal of this practice is in order to accentuate and give emphasis to the opening letter *heh* in “Hamelech,” for this letter contains a profound message for the day.

The Gemara¹ states that the world is like the letter *heh* in the sense that it is open at the bottom and quite easy for someone to “slip out” and lose his meaningful presence in the world. However, says the Gemara, it is also like a *heh* in that there is another opening between the leg of the *heh* and its roof. This means that if a person wishes to re-enter the world through doing teshuva, he can. The Gemara then asks why a separate opening should be required for re-entering the world? Why not simply come back the way through which one left? To this the Gemara replies somewhat cryptically: “That would not work.”

Naturally, we are left wondering why exactly it “would not work”...

DAMAGE THAT DULLS – THE PARADOX OF TESHUVAH

Of course, the above discussion of the Gemara can be understood on many levels. However, a very meaningful approach relates to what we could call The Paradox of Teshuva. The background to this paradox is as follows. Teshuva is there as a way to correct our mistakes, whether in the area of speech, deeds, attitudes or values. Clearly, the more mistakes we make, the more we need to do teshuvah. However, at the same time, the more mistakes we make, the less likely it is that we will do teshuvah. The reason for this is that when we do something wrong, we dull our sensitivity to that value. As the Gemara states it in quite blunt terms, “Once a person has committed a sin and then repeated it, it becomes in his eyes like a permitted matter.” Yet these are the very sensitivities which we need to prompt us to do teshuvah!

When one is in a physically or financially bad situation, one is keenly aware of the fact and would jump at any opportunity to change it for the better. In contrast, a natural part of being in a spiritually bad situation is the very lack of such awareness or sensitivity, and hence, the lack of the required impetus to change. In other words, the full measure of the problem with our wrongdoings is that not only are they mistakes, but they also impede a solution. In this respect, it seems as if the only people who wouldn't

1 Menachos 29b.

have this problem are great tzaddikim whose errors are minute and whose spiritual sensitivity remains in abundance. Where does that leave the rest of us?

Many of the inspiring stories of what led people to do major teshuva involve experiencing dramatic circumstances or serendipitous meetings which caught them off guard, shook them and triggered a fundamental re-appraisal of their life's direction. These stories, too, are extremely inspiring, and those involved are true heroes, but they do not provide guidance for everyone else – for although we can plan many things, we cannot plan to be caught off guard!

HAVING AN EYE FOR TESHUVAH

This is why the Gemara says that it “does not work” to come back the way you leave, for when one exits the world through their mistakes, they coat that path with a jading agent, thereby rendering it of little help as a potential way back.

So wherein lies the solution? The Gemara informs us that it must come from “higher up.” What does this mean?

If we may illustrate by way of analogy. A child defines “good” or “bad” situations based on whether or not he feels pleasure or pain, comfort or distress. If his arm hurts him, that is “bad” and he will cry for help, if it does not hurt him, he is fine. If he has no feeling whatsoever, that is also ok, for there is no pain. A grown-up in exactly the same situation will respond to that very lack of feeling in his arm with infinitely more alarm than he would to pain, for he is fully aware of the implications of this lack of feeling: circulation may have been cut off from the limb and he could risk losing its function and going through life without it. The faculty that brought about his precise opposite reaction to that of a child is his broader awareness of his situation and its implications for his effective existence. In other words, the very state which lower consciousness views as cause for reassurance is viewed by higher consciousness as cause for alarm.

This brings us to Rosh Hashanah. Being the first of the ten days of Teshuvah, we would naturally expect the day to involve or at least initiate us in the Teshuvah process. But it doesn't. It barely touches on the topic of Teshuvah. Instead, on Rosh Hashanah, we focus on Hashem as King of the world. This is, of course, very important, but how is it Teshuvah?

What we are doing on Rosh Hashanah is shaking off the lower consciousness which informs our view of the world with us in the center, and embracing the higher consciousness which comes from seeing the world as Hashem's kingdom. In our child-like world, which focusses on our own agenda and aggrandizement, the loss of certain sensitivities – to lashon hara, to focus during tefillah, to refusing to cave in to the yetzer hara, to emotional engagement in performing mitzvos – is of no cause for alarm. What Rosh Hashanah gives us is a higher view of the world where losing circulation to those spiritual limbs should indeed be the cause of nothing less than profound terror. In our current state, with those limbs rendered useless, Heaven forbid, our function in the world as it ultimately is would be catastrophically impaired.

The process of “Teshuva” is literally that of returning: from our virtual world to the world of Hashem. Rosh Hashanah provides us with a map of that world, and the more we familiarize ourselves with it the stronger and more urgent will be our resolve to do whatever it takes in order to ensure our meaningful function there. Rosh Hashanah presents us with the opening above the leg of the heh.

The Midrash² notes that when we say in Tehillim 27 “Hashem is my Light and my Salvation,” those two terms correspond to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur respectively. More than anything else, Rosh Hashanah is a day of light, a day where we embrace the world in light of its true existence. The explicit focus of the day is on Hashem as the Center of that world, but it carries with it a sub-text – the question of our place within that world. This sub-text does not in any way detract from the focus on *Malchuyos*; on the contrary, it is the path towards its greatest fulfillment. In this way, any regrettable lack of sensitivity which would by itself have impeded teshuvah will be enlisted by our highest faculties as profound and compelling impetus to re-enter the true existence of Hashem’s world in full capacity and with full vitality.

May we all merit this coming Rosh Hashanah to re-enter the world as we see it in its truest light. May we all be inscribed and sealed for Life, with all those who need it blessed with a speedy and complete recovery. And may the coming days signify a decisive step toward the world reaching its full rectification with the revelation of Hashem’s kingship, *bi’mheirah be’yameinu*.

B’virkas kesiva vachasima tova.

2 Midrash Shocher Tov, Tehillim 27.