



Responsibility, Guilt, *Teshuva*

High Holiday Texts 5786

Introduction

This has been a profoundly challenging year for each of us as rabbis. Given the rise of authoritarianism at home and the starvation unleashed on Gaza, we wanted to offer you texts aimed at supporting unflinching, courageous self examination, as well as texts of comfort for this season of repair. Many of these texts reflect on the ways that our natural defensiveness can act as a powerful barrier to accepting responsibility and engaging in deep teshuva. It takes tremendous bravery to see the ways we are complicit in our society's failings, and even greater courage to commit to changing that landscape. We hope that the sources, brief framing, and guiding questions help inspire and support you as you bring the ethical message of our tradition to your community this High Holiday season.

As the *machzor* says "May Your Arm fortify those who turn to You in hope expectantly and give them renewed strength and wings to fly." May this be a year of renewed ethical strength and spiritual flight.

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מבוא השערים י"ל"ח

ומעומק לבי אני מתחנן לדי, אנא אב הרחמן המרחם גם על בניו השפלים שלא יגרשו, ועל בני צדקיו, נביאיו ועבדיו שלא ידחו, רחם נא גם עלי וקרבני לקדושתך ולעבודתך, האר נא את עיני, אשר בקרבי ובסתרי נפשי יסתכלון, את כל נתיב לא ידעו עיט אל נפשי, אראה, וכל אורך ממנה לפני יגלה, ואלך אותה ואותו אשובה, ובהסתכלותו זאת גם זכותי בעצמם יסתכלו, ובתשובתי גם הם ישובו, מהם גם אני אבנה, ובזכותם גם אני אזכה...

Mevo HaShearim 10:38

From the depths of my heart I pray to God: Please, merciful Father, who has mercy on his lowly children that they not be banished, and on his righteous children-prophets and servants—that they not be pushed aside. Have mercy also on me and draw me close to sanctify and serve You. **Enlighten my eyes so that they see my innards and soul's secrets, that I may see each path unbeknownst to the eagle's eye, each vein revealed to me, and I will return it and myself to You. And via my gaze so, too, may others gaze at themselves, and in my return, may they return.** May I be built from them, and in their merit may I merit as well...

Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, better known for his Shoah-era divrei Torah collection “Esh Kodesh,” was a Hasidic Rebbe and deep student of education. This work was written to serve as a spiritual guide for the growth of his students, which sadly was unfinished due to his murder by the Nazis.

It takes so much for the religious leader of a community to be able to fight preconceived narratives and notions and see themselves as they are, including both virtues and faults. The rebbe's prayer to be able to successfully introspect and thereby to inspire the same internal work in others is a powerful mission statement for this moment where acceptance of responsibility is often lacking.

What gets in the way of us truly seeing ourselves in our totality? Have you seen an example of his vision of introspection inspiring others to do self work?

“Hearken to Her Voice: Empathy as Teshuva,” Dr. Marsha Pravder Mirkin in “Beginning Anew: A Woman’s Companion to the High Holidays” (1997)

[The] sequence of the Sarah-Hagar story followed by the Akeda teaches an important lesson about the obstacles one faces in developing empathy. It culminates when Abraham is able to do teshuva—to hear, listen, and respond to God’s voice telling him not to kill Isaac. The ability to hear attentively the voice of God, the voice that says “listen to Sarah” and does not mean obey, the voice that says “do not kill Isaac,” is the essence of teshuva. **We see that the primary obstacle to teshuva is the failure to pay attention to our own experience and to the experience of others.** During Hagar’s pregnancy, Sarah could not resonate with Hagar’s experience of wanting a child and yet fearing his loss. When Sarah told Abraham to get rid of Hagar and Ishmael, he could not hear the pain, loneliness, and fear behind her words. Similarly, had Abraham paid attention and truly listened for the voice of God, he could not have bound his son. Perhaps the test of the Akeda was whether Abraham was sufficiently attentive to hear the critical contradiction in God’s instructions: God said, “Take now thy son, thy only son Isaac” (Genesis 22:2). Yet God had already recognized both Isaac and Ishmael as Abraham’s sons. Had he listened, Abraham could have responded to the contradiction by saying that he had two sons whom he loved. Initially Abraham did not listen carefully enough and therefore failed to respond in the way I believe God wanted. Yet just as Hagar experienced teshuva when she heard God’s voice in the wilderness, held her son, and then saw water, Abraham experienced teshuva when he listened to the true voice of God telling him not to kill Isaac, stopped the action, and then saw the ram-offering. When Abraham was at last able to listen attentively and respond empathically, he experienced teshuva and thus finally passed God’s test.

Dr. Pravder Mirkin’s essay in the incredible collection “Beginning Anew” opens up a powerful insight into the meaning of teshuva. Through a close reading of the two narratives she examines (thoroughly worth reading in its entirety), she argues that it is the rush to do and act, rather than reflect and “pay attention to our own experience and to the experience of others” that blocks our ability to understand the will of the Divine and do it faithfully. In our haste, we can be so sure we understand other people, or even God, that we leap into action before sitting with their words and truly committing to the brave act of listening vulnerably.

What do you need to hear more deeply this year? When do you find yourself rushing into an interpretation of events or words rather than listening more deeply? What do you think could help you and your community hear what is behind words and act more deliberately?

שערי תשובה ב:ח'

וְיֵשׁ אָנָשִׁים רַבִּים יִמְנַע מֵהֶם אֹר הַתְּשׁוּבָה. כִּי הֵם זָכָאִים וְטַהוּרִים בְּעֵינֵיהֶם וְלֹא יִתְעַשְׂתּוּ עַל תְּקוּן מַעֲשֵׂיהֶם. כִּי דַמוֹ בְּנִפְשָׁם שֶׁהֵם מְתַקְנִים וְהֵם חֲטָאִים לֵה' מְאֹד. הֲלֹא כְּתוּב (קהלת ז':כ') כִּי אָדָם אֵין צָדִיק בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה טוֹב וְלֹא יִחַטָּא. וְהָאָנָשִׁים הָהֵם מְאֲשֶׁר הֵם בּוֹזִים לְדָבָר עֲוֹנוֹת. לֹא יִרְגִּישׁוּ וְלֹא יִבִּינוּ לָמוֹ. אוֹ הוֹדַע אֲלֵיהֶם חֲטָאתָם וְנִשְׁכַּח מִלִּבָּם אַחֲרֵי כֵן. וְהֵנָּם כְּמוֹ הַחוֹלָה שְׁאִינוֹ מִרְגִּישׁ בְּחֻלּוֹ וְלֹא יִחַשֵׁב עַל הַרְפוּאָה וַיִּכְבֵּד חֻלּוֹ תָּמִיד עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא יוּכַל לְהִרְפֹּא...
תמיד עד אשר לא יוכל להרפא...

Sha'arei Teshuvah 2:8

But there are many people for which the light of repentance is obstructed. For since they are innocent and pure in their eyes, they do not try to repair their actions, as it appears to them that they are [already] rectified, when in actuality they sin greatly to God. Is it not written (Ecclesiastes 7:20), "For there is no righteous man on earth who does what is best and doesn't sin?" But since people minimize sins, they do not feel or understand them; or when their sins are made known to them, it is afterwards forgotten from their hearts. And behold they are like a sick person who does not feel his sickness, so he does not think of a cure. So his sickness constantly gets worse, until he is not able to be healed...

The classic work of ethics "Shaarei Teshuva" ("Gates of Repentance") by Rabbenu Yonah Gerondi (1264) highlights one of the most profound spiritual challenges of our age — refusal to accept responsibility and feel the moral weight of our shortcomings. He highlights the healing power of overcoming our defensive impulses.

In this season of repentance it behooves all of us to ask, what are we choosing not to "feel or understand"? How have we personally or communally fallen short?

שני לוחות הברית, עשרת הדברות, מסכת יומא, נר מצוה ב'ט"ז
למדנו מכאן שלא יספיק לבעל תשובה עזיבת החטא בלבד, אלא שיעשה מעשים היפך עבירה שעשה. על
דרך משל...ואם העלים עיניו מצדקה, יפזר ממונו לעניים... ואם חטא בשררה, יתחבר לשפלים ונמוכים...
ובכל האברים שחטא ישתדל לקיים בהם מצות, כמו שאמרו רז"ל באותו דבר שחוטאים בו מתרצים, עד כאן
לשונו:

Shenei Luchot HaBerit, Aseret HaDibrot, Yoma, Ner Mitzva 2:16-17

From here we learn that it is not enough for a penitent person to simply abandon the sin, but they must act in opposition to the sin they committed. For example, if one closed their eyes to the needs of the poor, they should now give generously to the needy...If one sinned in the pursuit of power, they should now attach themselves to the lowly and humble...

And with every limb that sinned, one should now strive to fulfill a mitzvah with that very limb, as our sages said: "With the very thing a person sins, they must find appeasement."

The Shenei Luchot HaBerit (1648) by Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz is an encyclopedic work that blends mysticism, *halacha*, and ethics. When we do the work to accept we have seriously erred, it can be so easy to fall into self-flagellation and shame. Rabbi Horowitz reminds us that we can do more than cease causing harm, we have the ability and the obligation to push ourselves to improve the world and ourselves, finding a healthy channel for the painful aspects of teshuva.

What would applying this in your own life look like? What would it look like for your community to apply this teaching?