

A Yom Kippur Derashah

By: Chaim Mayerson

Concerning Yom Kippur, Maimonides writes:¹ “Yom Kippur is the time of repentance for all, for individuals and the community, and it is the **end of the [special period of] forgiveness** for the Jewish people. All are, therefore, required to repent and confess on Yom Kippur.”

Yom Kippur ends the *teshuvah* season, which opened with Rosh haShanah: “Although repentance and crying out are effective at all times, during the ten days from Rosh haShanah to the end of Yom Kippur they are particularly effective and immediately accepted, as is written (Isaiah 55:6), ‘Seek you the Lord while He may be found.’”² There are times when seeking the Lord through repentance is particularly desirable and effective. According to the Talmud,³ Isaiah’s words “while He may be found,” refer to Rosh haShanah, Yom Kippur, and the days in between. This period, then, is the time when repentance is most effective.

On Rosh haShanah, we proclaim God king, accept His authority—His ordinances and decrees—and begin to judge ourselves on the basis of His expectations of us as men and women, and as Jews. In practical terms, *teshuvah* means change and improvement, change not only in behavior, but in character as well. During this time, we repent for specific deeds, and we work on the character traits that led to them:⁴ “What is *teshuvah*? That the sinner abandon his sin, remove it from his thoughts, and resolve never to do it again.... That he regret his past. And [if his repentance is true], He who knows all secrets will testify that the sinner will never again repeat his transgression.”⁵

1. *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 2:7.

2. *Ibid.* 2:6.

3. *Yevamaot* 105a.

4. Regarding character traits that lead to sin, Maimonides writes (*Hilkhot Teshuvah* 7:3): “Do not say that repentance applies only to transgressions that involve concrete acts, such as sexual offenses, theft, and robbery. On the contrary, just as a person must repent for these, so must a person seek out his negative character traits, and abandon anger, hatred, jealousy, lechery, pursuit of money and honor, gluttony, and so forth—one must repent for all of these....

5. *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 2:2.

This process of evaluation, contrition, change, and improvement begun on Rosh haShanah, is meant to be concluded by the end of Yom Kippur. Put simply, when one leaves the synagogue at the close of Yom Kippur, one is meant to be a better person than he was ten days earlier when the *teshuvah* season began. This assertion suggests two fundamental questions: (1) Is change possible? (2) What is meant by “better person”—by what criteria do we judge ourselves?

Is Change Possible?

Judaism boldly asserts that it is. The Talmud⁶ tells of one Eliezer ben Durdaiya, a seasoned sinner who reportedly had visited every prostitute known.⁷

והא תניא: אמרו עליו על ר' אליעזר בן דורדיא שלא הניח זונה אחת בעולם שלא בא עליה. פעם אחת שמע שיש זונה אחת בכרכי הים והיתה נוטלת כיס של דינרין בשכרה. נטל כיס דינרין והלך ועבר עליה שבעה נהרות. בשעת הרגל דבר הפיחה. אמרה: כשם שהפיחה זו אינה חוזרת למקומה, כך אלעזר בן דורדיא אין מקבלין אותו בתשובה. הלך וישב בין שני הרים וגבעות. אמר: הרים וגבעות, בקשו עלי רחמים! אמרו לו: עד שאנו מבקשים עליך, נבקש על עצמנו, שנאמר⁸ "כי ההרים ימושו והגבעות תמוטינה." אמר: שמים וארץ, בקשו עלי רחמים. אמרו לו: עד שאנו מבקשים עליך, נבקש על עצמנו, שנאמר⁹ "כי שמים כעשן נמלחו והארץ כבגד תבלה." אמר: חמה ולבנה, בקשו עלי רחמים. אמרו לו: עד שנבקש עליך, נבקש על עצמנו, שנאמר¹⁰ "והפרה הלבנה, ובושה החמה." אמר: כוכבים ומזלות, בקשו עלי רחמים. אמרו לו: עד שנבקש עליך, נבקש על עצמנו, שנאמר¹¹ "ונמקו כל צבא השמים." אמר: אין הדבר תלוי אלא בי! הניח ראשו בין ברכיו וגעה בבכיה – עד שיצתה נשמתו. יצתה בת קול ואמרה: ר' אליעזר בן דורדיא מזומן לחיי העולם הבא.

6. *Avodah Zarah* 17a.

7. Actually, the Bible and rabbinic literature are filled with examples of persons who succeeded in changing for the better. King David is perhaps the most famous penitent; however, the Bible tells of others as well. A partial list of penitents (some clearly penitent according to the text of the Bible, others penitent according to various rabbinic sources) appears in the *pizmon* entitled *Horeita Derekh Teshuvah Levat haShoveivah*. This *pizmon* is recited by Ashkenazim on the Fast of Gedaliah. The *pizmon* alludes to the following penitents: Adam, Kain, Reuven, Yehudah, Ahav, and the residents of Nineveh, who repented in response to Jonah's exhortations.

8. Isaiah 54:10.

9. Isaiah 51:6.

10. Isaiah 24:23.

11. Isaiah 34:4.

In summary: after a particularly sobering experience during one of these visits, Eliezer ben Dur daiya despaired of ever being accepted as a penitent: "So he went and sat down between mountains and hills. 'Mountains and hills,' he cried, 'beg for mercy on my behalf!' 'Beg mercy for you?' they responded, 'let us first beg mercy for ourselves'.... 'Heaven and earth,' he cried, 'beg for mercy on my behalf!' 'Beg mercy for you?' they responded, 'let us first beg mercy for ourselves'.... 'Sun and moon,' he cried, 'beg for mercy on my behalf!' 'Beg for mercy for you?' they responded, 'let us first beg mercy for ourselves'.... And then he said: 'It depends on me alone.' He hung his head between his knees, raised his voice, and wept out loud until his soul departed. And then a voice rang out from heaven: 'Eliezer ben Dur daiya is accepted to the world to come.'"

Although change may come in one stark moment of insight, such as Eliezer ben Dur daiya's "it depends on me alone," for most of us, numbed by routine and hardened by self-deception, the process is long and difficult. Judaism recognizes this. The sounding of the shofar on Rosh haShanah and during the month of Elul, the *selihot* recited early each morning from the week before Rosh haShanah until Yom Kippur,¹² the long hours of prayer, *Tashlikh*, *Kapparot*, the additions to the *Amidah*, the drama of Yom Kippur from *Kol Nidrei* to *Ne'ilah*, the fast - the entire liturgy during this period constitutes a massive assault on our resistance to change.

And the story of Eliezer ben Dur daiya reminds us that it depends on us alone.

What Are the Criteria for Judgment?

One of the central themes of the liturgy is the thirteen attributes proclaimed by God while Moses hid in the cleft of the rock (Exodus 34:5-7): "And the Lord descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. And the Lord passed by before him, and He proclaimed, "The

12. This, of course, is the Ashkenazi custom. *Edot haMizrah* begin *selihot* on the first of Elul, and their *selihot* include sounding of the *shofar* when God's thirteen attributes are recited.

Lord, the Lord is a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in kindness and truth. He keeps kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and acquitting the penitent.”

The entire structure of the *selihot* is based on this passage, and it is recited repeatedly with great force and dramatic effect at the conclusion of *Ne'ilah*. In the words of the piyyut: “I pitch my tent upon the thirteen attributes.”¹³

The repeated invocation of the thirteen attributes is based on R. Yohanan's remark in the Talmud:¹⁴

”ויעבר ה' על פניו ויקרא”, אמר רבי יוחנן: אלמלא מקרא כתוב אי אפשר לאומר. מלמד שנתעטף הקדוש ברוך הוא כשליח צבור, והראה לו למשה סדר תפילה. אמר לו: כל זמן שישראל חוטאין – יעשו לפני כסדר הזה. ואני מוחל להם.

“The Holy One enwrapped Himself [in a *talit*] as a *sheli'ah tzibbur*, showed Moses the order for prayer, and told him, ‘Whenever Israel sins, let the people recite this before Me, and I will forgive them.’”

The difficulty of R. Yohanan's statement is obvious. Are the thirteen attributes some magic incantation by which we can “force” God to grant forgiveness? Or, alternately, does God need to be reminded He is merciful, gracious, slow to anger, and so forth?

The explanation of R. Yohanan's opinion and the liturgical structures based on it may lie in another talmudic citation¹⁵ of the same biblical passage:

אבא שאול אומר: “ואנוהו” – הוי דומה לו: מה הוא חנון ורחום – אף אתה היה חנון ורחום.

“Abba Shaul said, [‘This is my God] and I will glorify Him’ (Exodus 15:2). Be like unto Him; as He is merciful and gracious, so you be merciful and gracious.”

13. *Ezkerah veEhemayah*, *Ne'ilah* service, D. Goldschmidt, *Mahazor laYamim haNora'im*, pp. 663–664.

14. *Rosh haShanah* 17b.

15. *Shabbat* 133b.

Abba Shaul exhorts us to *imitatio Dei*, to emulate God, and the thirteen attributes are the key to this emulation. What little direct insight the Bible provides into the character of God, is provided in the thirteen attributes, and these serve as the goal for man's aspiration to Godliness.

In this context, it is important to note that, although R. Yohanan says that God showed Moses *seder tefilah*, an order of prayer, R. Yohanan goes on to quote God as saying, "Whenever Israel sins, let the people..." Here the Hebrew reads *ya'asu* - **let the people do**. Because the passage says that God showed Moses an order of prayer, it is logical to translate *ya'asu* as "let the people recite" God's thirteen attributes. However, *ya'asu* implies much more: let them **do** the thirteen attributes, let them **live** the thirteen attributes.

By reciting the thirteen attributes tens, perhaps hundreds, of times throughout the *teshuvah* season, we repeatedly remind ourselves—not God—of the criteria by which we must evaluate our lives and the goals for which we must strive. Mercy, grace, patience, kindness, truth, and readiness to forgive are the traits we must all cultivate and apply in our own lives. The High Holy Days, the *teshuvah* season, is the time we set aside to develop these traits.

I would like to thank Rabbi Nahum Muschel of Monsey, New York for several important insights that I have used here, and I would like to thank my editor, Yitzhak Zuriel, for his help and for one particularly important comment.

Chaim Mayerson was born in Dayton, Ohio, studied at Yeshiva University, and made Aliya in 5737. Chaim works as a technical writer in the Project Delivery Line.