

INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

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This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of our parents, Daniel bar David & Esther Miriam bas Yaakov and Noach Yaakov ben Chaim & Dvora Esther bas Moshe.
"May their Neshamos have an Aliya!"

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Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYELECH

The Real You

...there among the nations that I have banished you, you will reflect on the situation. You will then return to Hashem your God and you will obey him [...] You and your children (will repent) with all your heart and soul (30:1-2).

Ramban understands the verse, "This commandment that you are charged (to obey) isn't hidden nor far off from you" (30:11), as referring to the *mitzvah* of *teshuvah* that is introduced above (30:1-2). Ramban continues; "this *mitzvah* is, in fact, not hard to do and it can be done at all times and in all places."

Ramban's description of the *mitzvah* of *teshuvah* as rather easy can be difficult to comprehend. After all, year after year, we seem to find ourselves in the same situation and repenting for the same sins as in previous years. Ramban's comment on the ease of *teshuvah* is reminiscent of the not-yet-reformed smoker who says "quitting smoking is the easiest thing in the world – I have done it a hundred times."

This becomes even more troubling when we examine Maimonides' description of *teshuvah* (*Yad Hilchos Teshuvah* 2:2): "What constitutes *teshuvah*? A sinner must abandon his sins and remove them from his thoughts, resolving in his heart, never to commit them again [...] Similarly, he must regret the past. He must attain a level that he knows (that the Almighty) will testify for him that he will never return to this sin again [...] He must verbally confess and state these matters which he resolved in his heart."

Clearly, the objective is to regret the past and pledge to never again commit those sins again. How can anyone honestly come back year after year and say the exact same words, asking forgiveness for the same sins time and time again? At what point is it no longer believable? Even in the case of the truly penitent, how can he look himself in the mirror after resolving

to no longer commit the sins that he knows he'll be repenting for again next Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur? What kind of *teshuvah* is this? What honest commitment can one possibly make? The answer to this question is probably the key to understanding what we are trying to accomplish during these "ten days of repentance."

In all likelihood you, or someone you know, has struggled with their weight at some point. Imagine, for a moment, someone who is very overweight, but has committed to a strict diet, suddenly facing a crucial test: a pizza pie with all the toppings, accompanied by two extra-large orders of fries, has "miraculously" been delivered to them. Obviously, some people will be able to overcome their urge to inhale this pizza and fries (we call them weirdos). But others will likely succumb to their desires. Why?

Most people that succumb to the "pizza test" are thinking, "Let's face it – I weigh 300 lbs., who am I kidding?", and proceed to devour the entire pizza and fries. In other words, the reason they continue down the same path is because they look at themselves as overweight. Their diet was rooted in trying to change their behavior – when they really should have been focused on trying to change themselves. Therefore, they aren't dealing with this as a new situation; they are, in reality, succumbing to their past mistakes and accepting that as their reality. This new eating indiscretion is rooted in their past behavior, which is why they fail.

This is exactly what *teshuvah* is supposed to address; when we commit to doing *teshuvah* we have to 1) regret the past 2)



resolve to no longer commit this transgression. In other words, we commit to making a real change. While it is true that we must distance ourselves from how we behaved in the past, our commitment isn't merely a behavioral change, it is a change of self definition. We must say, "In the coming year I may be faced with a test of the same sin, and hopefully I will be able to restrain myself because I truly do not want to be that type of person."

"But even if I fail, it will be because I couldn't control myself, it will absolutely **not be** a transgression based on my past behavior." At that point one's transgressions are not a repetition of past sins. This is why Ramban says it is not hard to do. One has to merely decide to be the person he wants to become, and commit to leave who he currently is behind. At that point Hashem will help him find the true path to *teshuvah* (see Ramban on 30:6).

Did You Know...

The first night of Rosh Hashanah is also when we eat the first meal of the year. This special meal is marked by the tradition of creating *simanim* (signs) through the consumption of certain foods. There are many that are universally accepted as customary to eat; *karsi* (leek) so that our enemies may be "cut down," *silka* (beet) and *tamri* (date) for the removal and obliteration of our enemies, and *rubia* (black-eyed peas)

What Are Kids Good For?

Gather together all the people – men, women, small children...so that they will hear and so that they will learn and they will fear Hashem... (31:12)

This week's *parsha* contains the *mitzvah* of *hakhel* – the gathering of the entirety of the Jewish people on the holiday of Sukkos following the *shemitta* year. The king at that time would read from different sections in the *Chumash* of *Devarim* from an elevated platform. The Gemara (*Bavli Chagiga* 3a) explains that the men came to study and the women came to hear. The Gemara then asks; "Why did the very small children come? To give reward to those that brought them" (*ibid*).

Maharsha (*ad loc*) explains that the Gemara wonders why the Torah discusses the children in this verse and then mentions the children again in the very next verse. In fact, the next verse clearly explains that the children are coming to learn from the experience. So, explains Maharsha, the first verse must be talking about children who are too young to gain from the experience. Therefore, the Gemara explains they are only coming in order "to give reward to those that bring them."

Simply understood, the Gemara seems to be saying that the extra strain of bringing the very young children will bring some kind of reward to their much beleaguered parents. Perhaps this can be understood along the lines of the Talmudic dictum (*Avos* 5:26) "commensurate to the pain is the reward." But notwithstanding the fact that children can inflict exquisite discomfort on their parents, this cannot be the sole reason for bringing them. First of all, older children can be even more painful to drag to a speech that they can hardly understand. Second, if it is simply to make the experience more difficult, why shouldn't even people without young children have to do something to make the experience more trying? Why are only parents of very young children worthy of this added aggravation?

Obviously, there has to be another reason why we bring very young children to such a gathering. Have you ever noticed that some sports crazy fans bring their one year old children to baseball and football games decked out in baby sized team

jerseys and other team themed items? What possible purpose can there be in such an effort? Clearly, the child will have no recollection of the event or of his parents' single-minded obsession; so, why would someone go to all that effort?

The answer has to be that it is an internalization, for ourselves and our children, that we want our legacy to be connected to this ideal. There are families who take great pride in being multigenerational fans of certain teams. So too, by the *mitzvah* of *hakhel* we are expressing the ideal, that our deepest desire is for our children to be connected and bound to the values of the Torah and the Jewish people. The reason these parents earn special reward isn't because of the added aggravation; it is because they are making the greatest expression of their personal commitment to Hashem and his Torah: They want their children to follow in their footsteps and the legacy of the Jewish people.

Did You Know Cont.

in order for our merits or assets to increase in the coming year.

The Geonim mention the age-old custom of eating additional items not mentioned in the Talmud. This includes eating the head of an animal (customarily head of a lamb or a fish), as a request that Hashem place us in a position of leadership and not servitude.

Another ancient practice is eating fatty meat and sweet beverages as a sign of a prosperous and sweet new year. The Geonim traces this custom back to the second Beis Hamikdash, when Ezra and Nechemia instructed the people on Rosh

Hashanah to "go and eat fatty dishes and drink sweet drinks" (*Nechemia* 8:10).

The Tur remarks that Jews have always added to the list of *simanim* (often using wordplay). Many people eat carrots since the Yiddish word for carrot is *mehren*, which is similar to the word *mehr* or "more." In Morocco, they serve boiled lungs as a *siman* since the Hebrew word for lungs *reaya* resembles the word *riya* (vision).

There's also a *siman* by some in France to eat bananas because the French word for banana, *banane*, sounds just like the words for good year in French, "*bonne année*."

Many years ago, Rav Heinemann Shlita introduced a now famous Baltimore

siman to take lettuce, half a raisin, and celery as an indication to "let-us-have-a-raise-in-salary."

Although it is not mentioned in the Gemara, the Tur also records eating apples and honey as an old Ashkenazic custom. Maharil (*Darkei Moshe* 583:3) says that the apple reminds us of the sweet aroma that accompanied Yaakov Avinu when he appeared before Yitzchak to receive the *brachos* (according to Midrashim, this occurred on Rosh Hashanah, see *Biur HaGra*). Moreover, honey represents an additional significance in that the Gematria of honey (*d'vash*) is equivalent to "Merciful Father" (*Bnei Yissosscher* 2:13).



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