

INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

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This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Reuven Ben Shaul.

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"May his Neshama have an Aliya!"

28 ELUL

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

PARSHAS NETZAVIM

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. 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 being 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) 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.

(continued on reverse)

Characteristic Behavior

You are standing today, all of you before Hashem your God... (29:9)

Rashi (ad loc) relates that when *Bnei Yisroel* heard all the terrible, and almost incomprehensible, tragedies that would befall the Jewish people as a direct result of their transgressions, their faces turned pallid [these tragedies are described in chilling detail in last week's *parsha*]. In order to reassure them, continues Rashi, Moshe points out that, they too, did much to anger Hashem and yet "*You are standing today, all of you before Hashem your God.*" In other words, just as you survived Hashem's wrath, thus far, so too you will survive in the future.

Interestingly enough, there are two places in the Torah where these *tochachas* (severe consequences) are mentioned; once in last week's *parsha* and once in *Parshas Bechukosai*. This begs the question; why is it only by the *tochacha* of last week's *parsha* that their faces turned pallid - why not by the first *tochacha* mentioned in *Parshas Bechukosai*?

Ramban (*Vayikra* 26:16) deals with the question of why we need two separate places in the Torah to recount the

calamitous results of transgressing against Hashem. He explains that the first *tochacha* refers to the sins that caused the destruction of the first *Beis Hamikdosh* while the second *tochacha* refers to the transgressions that led to the destruction of the second *Beis Hamikdosh*.

The Talmud (*Bavli Yoma* 9b) notes that the first *Beis Hamikdosh* was destroyed because the Jews violated the cardinal three sins of idolatry, immorality, and bloodshed. But why, asks the Talmud, if the Jews of the second *Beis Hamikdosh* toiled in Torah study, fulfilling *mitzvos*, and doing acts of *chesed*, was that Temple destroyed? The Talmud explains that the destruction of the second *Beis Hamikdosh* came because of the senseless hatred among them.

The first *Beis Hamikdosh* was destroyed because we couldn't control our behavior. The second *Beis Hamikdosh* was destroyed (and we are still in that exile!) for a far more sinister defect – we couldn't get along with one another. Not being able to get along with one another,

whether because of petty jealousy or just begrudging someone else's very existence, is a very deep character flaw. The sin is much more severe than sinning against Hashem; in fact, Hashem brought the Great Flood and destroyed the world, because the people of that generation were stealing from one another petty, almost insignificant, items. The generation of the Tower of Babel, which openly rebelled against Hashem, were merely dispersed.

Consequently, this also means that all the Torah study and *chesed* of the generation of the second *Beis Hamikdosh* were really only superficial actions. That is, much like many in our current generation, they seemed to miss the point that observance of Torah and *mitzvos* is ultimately to make us better people. This is why *Bnei Yisroel* turned white when they heard the destruction that was to follow for the sins of the generation of the second Temple. They were, in effect being told, not that they transgressed for pleasure but that they were going to devolve to becoming low quality people. That is a devastating message.

Did You Know Continued

Another ancient practice is eating fatty meat and sweet beverages as a sign of a prosperous and sweet new year. The *Geonim* trace this custom back to the second *Beis Hamikdosh*, 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 Yissoscher* 2:13).



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