



**Partners In Torah**

**San Diego-Los Angeles-Ventura**

**Take home Dvar Torah**

## **The Ten Days of Teshuva**

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***Hello, Welcome!***

**Partners In Torah is a community-wide, independent and inclusive adult education program focusing on understanding Jewish relevancy to our lives by studying text most interesting to each participant.**

**Through one-on-one discussion for 1 hour each week, friendships are forged between mentors and mentees.**

***Partners in Torah has proven to be effective at reclaiming the rich legacy of wisdom, inspiration, and guidance for many who have, until now, lacked access.***

***Thank you for joining us!***

**Please encourage friends to join you in participating so that we may grow together as a community.**

Tomorrow night, Wednesday, October 2<sup>nd</sup> at sundown, Rosh Hashana 5785 will begin. Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur comprise ten days which are called עשרת ימי תשובה - *The Ten Days of Teshuva*.

Maimonides writes: (The Laws of Teshuva Chapter 3) based on a teaching in the Talmud.

כל שנה ושנה שוקלין עונות כל אחד ואחד מבאי העולם עם זכיותיו ביום טוב של ראש השנה מי שנמצא צדיק נחתם לחיים ומי שנמצא רשע נחתם למיתה והבינוני תולין אותו עד יום הכפורים אם עשה תשובה נחתם לחיים ואם לאו נחתם למיתה:

*Each and every year, the sins of each and every person are weighed, on the holiday of Rosh Hashana. One who is found to be a Tzadik, is sealed for life, and one who is found to be evil, is sealed for death. **Those in between, are hanging in the balance until Yom Kippur. If they did teshuva, they are sealed for life, but if they did not do teshuva, they are sealed for death.***

Our Sages teach us that we should consider ourselves as “those in between.” Neither righteous nor evil. Hence, our fate is hanging in the balance. If we do teshuva during these crucial days, we will be inscribed in the book of life, but if we do not, we will be inscribed in the book of death.

These ten days are a gift from Hashem to help us attain a good judgement for the new year. In order to reap the greatest benefit and take full advantage of these most important days, it is essential that we understand the nature of their specialness.

Let us begin by explaining the meaning of *Teshuva*. תשובה (*teshuva*) comes from the word שב which means *return*. When we sin, the negative effect of the sin on us, drives a wedge between us and

Hashem, distancing us from him. The more we sin, the further away from Hashem we go. Teshuva – *returning* - is the process whereby we remove all the barriers and obstacles (sins) between us and Hashem so that we may re-connect, and once again be close to Him.

The Prophet Isaiah says: (59:1,2)

(א) הֵן לֹא קִצְרָה יַד יְדֹד מִהוֹשִׁיעַ וְלֹא כִבְדָה אָזְנוֹ מִשְׁמוֹעַ:  
(ב) כִּי אִם עֲוֹנוֹתֵיכֶם הָיוּ מִבְדָּלִים בֵּינְכֶם לְבֵין אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְחַטָּאוֹתֵיכֶם הִסְתִּירוּ פָנִים מִכֶּם מִשְׁמוֹעַ

*1) Hashem's hand is not too short to save you, nor have His ears become too deaf to hear, 2) Rather it is your sins that separate you from Him, and as a result of your sins, Hashem has hidden His face from listening to your prayers.*

This verse is the source of the concept that our sins create a barrier between us and Hashem and prevent us from enjoying the benefits of a close relationship with Him.

The Talmud teaches us (Tractate Rosh Hahana 18b), that during the Ten Days of Teshuva, Hashem is closer to the Jewish People and is eager to forgive their sins.

אמר רב שמואל בר איביא משמיה דרב מניין לגזר דין של צבור שאינו נחתם אינו נחתם והכתיב נכתם עונך לפני אלא אף על גב שנחתם נקרע שנאמר כה' אלהינו בכל קראנו אליו והכתיב דרשו ה' בהמצאו התם ביחיד הכא בצבור ביחיד אימת אמר רבה בר אבוה אלו עשרה ימים שבין ראש השנה ליום הכפורים ויהי כעשרת

*Rabbi Shmuel the son of Inia said in the name of Rav: "How do we know that even if a negative judgment was decreed against a congregation, the judgment can be repealed? For the verse says, 'Who is like Hashem our G-d who answers us every time we call out to him.' Every time means every time."*

*The Talmud asks, "How could that be? There is a different verse that implies that Hashem answers only when He is close to us. For it says, 'Seek out Hashem when He is present, call out to Him when He is close.'"*

*The Talmud answers: "That verse refers to an individual. An individual will only be answered when Hashem is close and present. However, a congregation, will always be answered."*

*"When is it that Hashem is about and close such that even an individual is always answered?" Asks the Talmud. "On the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur," comes the answer.*

During this time, even an individual who has had a negative judgment can have his judgment repealed, for Hashem is very close to him and eager to forgive his sins.

Our sages use a metaphor to illustrate this concept.

If a commoner wishes an audience with the king of his country to make a request, he must go through much red tape and bureaucracy before being granted an appointment. Even if he does get the audience, it is questionable if the king will grant his wish. However, when the king is out of the palace, and in the town square meeting the common folk, and listening to their concerns, the chances of speaking with the king and having his request granted are much greater.

In the same way, during the Ten Days of Teshuva, Hashem is out and about, accessible to the Jewish people granting them forgiveness for their sins, and restoring their closeness to Him.

It is because of Hashem's special closeness during these ten days, that our sages teach us that we should be more careful with our deeds, and increase the number and quality of mitzvot that we do.

Maimonides writes:

רמב"ם יד החזקה הלכות תשובה פרק ג  
נהגו כל בית ישראל להרבות בצדקה ובמעשים טובים ולעסוק במצות מראש השנה  
ועד יום הכפורים יתר מכל השנה

*The entire Jewish Nation keeps the custom of increasing charity and good deeds and involve themselves in good deeds between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, more than the rest of the year.*

It is also brought in the שלחן ערוך - *The Code of Jewish Law*, that even where the accepted custom is to be lenient, during the Ten Days of Teshuva, a person should adopt the stricter option for himself, even though he doesn't know if he will be able to continue it after Yom Kippur. (This refers to where there is an argument in Jewish law between two great Sages, one rendering a lenient ruling and the other a strict one. Even though during the year one may adopt the lenient opinion, during the Ten Days of Teshuva, he should adopt the stricter opinion.)

This idea poses a question. Isn't that hypocritical? Putting on an act during the Ten Days of Teshuva even though we don't intend to keep it afterwards? And who exactly are we fooling anyway? Hashem knows we are only doing it temporarily!

Our Sages provide a marvelous parable to resolve this seeming problem.

There was once a king who wanted to understand how his subjects lived, in order to enact laws that would make life easier for them. To accomplish this, he took a random sampling of each type of person who lived in his kingdom, from the great lords, the judges, the lawyers, doctors, white collar workers, blue collar workers etc. all the way down to the lowest job in the kingdom. He sent each person selected, a letter telling him that he, The King, was coming to visit him in his home, on a

certain date, *to see how they live*, so he can better understand their needs.

One of the people to receive a letter from the king was an old woodchopper who lived with his wife in a tumbledown shack in the forest. After reading the letter, he ran to his wife and read her the letter. Once the message sunk in, the woodchopper exclaimed.

“The King is coming to visit us here, in this very shack!? How can we host the king in a broken down, tumbledown shack like this? The place hasn’t been painted in years. The windows have holes stuffed with rags, so the wind doesn’t get in! The chairs that we balance ourselves on wobble, and the king will fall off and hurt himself! We have to fix this place up before the king comes!”

His wife said to him. “I don’t understand! I have been telling you that for years! And you have always told me that we can’t afford to fix the place up. Now that the king is coming, all of a sudden, we have the money to do renovations?”

The woodchopper replied, “We don’t have the money! And I don’t know where it will come from! Maybe I will have to chop wood day and night for a while to scrape together a few extra dollars. Maybe I will have to borrow some money, but all I know is that is that we cannot let the king into a place like this!”

So, his wife tries another one. “Read the letter again. It says the king wants *to see how we live*. This is how we live! What, are you going to build him a throne? Put up velvet curtains? That’s not what the king wants!

Now, this old woodchopper was no fool, and after thinking for a moment, he said. “If the king wanted only to see how we live, he would not have sent a letter telling us when he is coming. He would have paid

us a surprise visit, and he would have seen how we live in all its glory. From the fact that he sent us a letter telling us when he is coming, it is clear that there is something else he wants to see. He wants to see, if we consider it the greatest privilege in the world that he has chosen to come and visit us! And if we have prepared for his visit according to our meager means. Of course, we can't build him a throne worthy of him. Of course, we can't decorate with velvet curtains. The king doesn't expect that at all. But he does want to see if we have made, according to our meager means, some modest improvements in honor of his visit."

It is interesting to note, that in the descriptions of all judgments in scripture, it describes Hashem as **coming** to judge us. And, especially during the Ten Days of Teshuva, when Hashem is close to us to forgive our sins. In honor of this special closeness that Hashem gives us during these ten days, it is very appropriate that we show Him in some way, that we recognize and appreciate the golden opportunity that He is giving us. The way we could do this would be to spruce up our deeds and strain ourselves to do the best we can, according to our means.

We can easily understand based on this, how if the woodchopper in the example, had done nothing to prepare for the king's visit, it would have been considered an insult and a great display of disrespect to the king. "I told you I was coming, and you didn't do one thing to prepare for my arrival? You obviously don't have any respect for me!"

In the very same way, our Sages teach us that if we fail to make any improvements over the Ten Days of Teshuva, it is considered an insult to Hashem.

But in the case of the Ten days of Teshuva, there is an added degree of insult. It stems from the fact that we have distanced ourselves from Hashem through our sins, and Hashem has come personally to forgive them to restore the relationship. All we have to do is ask, and it will be



done. So, why aren't we asking? What are we waiting for? There is only one possible answer. We couldn't care less that we have sins and that we are far away from Hashem. It is of no interest to us to repair our relationship with Hashem and to restore the closeness. We are perfectly happy with the way things are, far away from Hashem.

What could be more offensive? And, is the Ten Days of Teshuva the time you want to be insolent to the judge?

It is with this concept, that our Sages resolve a major difficulty in the teaching of Maimonides cited above.

*Each and every year, the sins of each and every person are weighed, on the holiday of Rosh Hashana. One who is found to be a Tzadik, is sealed for life, and one who is found to be evil, is sealed for death. Those in between, are hanging in the balance until Yom Kippur. **If they did teshuva, they are sealed for life, but if they did not do teshuva, they are sealed for death.***

Maimonides had previously explained that a Tzadik is someone who has more good deeds than bad, and that an evil person is someone who has more evil deeds than good ones. An "in-betweenener," is someone who has the same number of each. That being the case, why isn't it sufficient for the in-betweenener to just do another mitzvah to tip the scale in favor of the good? Why does the Rambam say only if a person does *teshuva* will he be sealed in the book of life?

Our Sages answer that the sin of not doing *teshuva* during the Ten Days of Teshuva would in and of itself be considered such a grievous sin, that it would outweigh any extra mitzvot done, tipping the scale to the side of the sins. One who is sullied in sin and doesn't care to clean himself up, indicates that having sins is not objectionable to him. He is saying to

Hashem, “So what if I have done something You told me not to do? I don’t care!” That is akin to a slap in the face of Hashem.

Now, that we understand the special opportunity Hashem gives us during these ten days to erase our sins through teshuva, let’s explain exactly how Teshuva is done.

There are three steps to the process of teshuva. They are simple, but they must be sincere. If a person’s heart is not in it, it won’t work.

1. ודוי - Verbally, privately, admit the sin – acknowledge that we have disobeyed Hashem’s commandment, and own up to it.
2. חרטה - Remorse – regret having done the sin, to the point where you wish you could go back in time and pull it out of existence
3. עזיבת החטא - Accept upon oneself never to do it again. This follows logically from #2 because if a person would be ready to do it again at the next opportunity, or even at some future time, he obviously doesn’t really regret ever having done it.

Our Sages teach us that when a person performs the process of teshuva properly, it is as if the act has been erased from reality. He will never have to face that action and give judgment for it, ever again.

The following true story illustrates the point. (I heard this very story from two different, unrelated people, therefore, I believe it is true.)

It was a beautiful wedding; the bride and groom looked so beautiful and made such a handsome couple. Everyone was saying how it was a match made in heaven. After the last dance was over, the father of the bride went to his jacket, which he had draped over the back of his chair during the dancing, to retrieve the envelope of cash he had prepared to pay the caterer for the wedding. To his horror, the envelope was missing. There were thousands of dollars in that envelope. He had been saving for years to be able to pay for his lovely daughter’s wedding.

It probably fell out during the dancing, he figured. They searched the entire hall from top to bottom, with no success. Perhaps it got folded up in the table cloth when the table was cleaned. They searched every tablecloth, again, with no success.

Oh well! What could he do? He would have to put together a new payment for the caterer. Where it would come from, he did not know.

Fast forward a few months. The bride's parents received the video of the wedding. They sat down to watch it, and lo and behold, they saw in the video how the groom's father took the envelope from his jacket pocket as it hung over the chair.

Now they knew where the money went, but how were they going to get it back? If they were to accuse the groom's father of stealing it, he would of course deny it, and the accusation would only cause very hard feelings.

After thinking about the problem, they came up with the following solution. "Let's invite the groom's parents to join us and watch the wedding video together!"

Everything started out jovial and festive as the video began. However, as the video progressed, the groom's father began fidgeting. As the video continued, he became more and more restless. He was obviously thinking, "Oh no! What if I was caught on video stealing the money!" As the video played on, he began sweating profusely. As the video reached the scene that would show him stealing the money, he could bear to watch it no more, and he passed out on the floor.

Our Sages teach us, that on the day of judgment, at the end of our lives, we are going to watch a video of our lives. In it we will see all the sins and transgressions that we performed in our lifetime. Watching with us, will be Hashem and a court of holy rabbis from our generation. It is

going to be very embarrassing as we watch ourselves doing things that we shouldn't have done. We're going to want to pass out but we won't be able to.

But, the process of teshuva, is like splicing the video just before the deed, and just after it, as if it never happened. The piece of tape falls on the floor and is swept out with the garbage. It never hits the screen, and we will never have to see it. Teshuva has removed it forever.

What an amazing gift from Hashem! He allows us to totally remove our misdeeds from reality.

A word of caution. When we have wronged another human being, as in the story above, teshuva cannot be done until the person asks for and receives forgiveness from the one he wronged. So, in the story, he would have pay back every penny and ask forgiveness for all the grief and anguish that he caused, before he could begin asking Hashem forgiveness for stealing.

Seeing how easy it is to do teshuva, there is really no excuse not to do teshuva during these special days. Additionally, being that it is so easy, it would be a very strong critique against a person who ignores this amazing opportunity to clean his slate.

Although the Ten Days of Teshuva begin tomorrow night with Rosh Hashana, on Rosh Hashana proper, there is no mention of sin at all. (That is reserved for Yom Kippur, which will be the topic of next week's booklet.) Why is that? Isn't Rosh Hashana the Day of Judgment?

The answer is, on Rosh Hashana we are occupied with a matter of greater importance, coronating Hashem as our King. Since on Rosh Hashana Hashem became King over His world, it is appropriate that we, as His privileged subjects, renew our commitment to dedicate ourselves to Him. This is the essence of Rosh Hashana. We spend the two days of

the holiday focusing on Hashem as King of the universe, and our personal King.

This, in a most significant way, represents the greatest “Teshuva”, return to Hashem, of all. Instead of ignoring Him in light of the many things that distract us from Him, we are concentrating all our efforts to reconnect to Him, and to be better servants to Him.

Once we have done this, we are in the perfect spot to take advantage of the remaining days of teshuva to repair our ways. Now is the time to prepare ourselves for His visit because we understand that Hashem is *coming to visit* us.