

Rosh Hashanah

Lessons from Hataras Nedarim

Making Solid Pledges

מי יתן טהור מטמא לא אחד.

Who can [draw] pure from impure? [only] One (Iyov 14:4).

Tzaddikim said that in order to purify ourselves from the *yetzer hara*, all we need is לא אחד – one unmistakable, resolute No! מי יתן טהור מטמא—even someone who is *tamei* from his sins can still wrench himself away from the *yetzer hara* and purify himself. He may be distant from Hashem, but he is still in heaven.

Included in saying No is the need to undertake good *kabbalos*, firm pledges to improve ourselves.

Rav Tzadok Hakohen of Lublin said⁹² that every time the Gemara seems to go off topic, these tangents do relate to the subject on a deep, mystical level. *Maseches Rosh Hashanah* includes a number of pages (5b-6b) on the subject of *nedarim*, vows. In order to properly do *teshuvah*, one must accept upon himself one resolute, unmistakable pledge.

92. Yisrael Kedoshim, 6, s.v. v'nikve'u.

A vow that is strong and consistent requires awareness of one's own capacity and capabilities, and not undertaking more than one can fulfill.

At the end of *hataras nedarim* we make a statement:

I hereby declare before you, that I nullify from now on all vows, all oaths... And should I forget the stipulations of this declaration and make any vow from this day on, from this moment I regret them, and stipulate that they are all null and void...

This custom is based on the Gemara (*Nedarim* 23b), which Rabbeinu Tam⁹³ explains as a *mesiras moda'ah*, a declaration of intent to preemptively nullify a future agreement.

Why must we renew this declaration every year? Why shouldn't each child, as he becomes of age,⁹⁴ just make such a declaration once and for all, nullifying all the vows he will make in his lifetime?⁹⁵

Perhaps Chazal wanted to teach us the proper way to use these Days of *Teshuvah*. It is human nature that in a state of inspiration or *hisorerus*, we take on more than we can handle. After some time, as the inspiration fades, we realize that we are not able to follow through. It takes wisdom and foresight to know what one can manage. Chazal instituted *hataras nedarim* each year, hinting that when it comes to vows, we should not make them permanent; rather, we should take one year at a time.⁹⁶

The prohibition for breaking one's vow is in *Parshas Mattos* (Bamidbar 30:3), לא יחל דברו ככל היצא מפיו יעשה — *He shall not desecrate his word; according to all that comes from his mouth he should do.* *Sefarim*⁹⁷ see in this pasuk an allusion to the practice of *hataras nedarim* during Elul: the final letters of לא יחל דברו ככל spell out אלול.

93. *Nedarim* 23b, Ran; *Tosafos*.

94. Vows have legal efficacy from the stage of סמוך לאיש, a year before *bar/bas mitzvah*. Perhaps this declaration works from that age as well.

95. The Rambam (*Hilchos Nedarim* 2:4) differs from our version of the Gemara and gives ten years as his example, but even the Rambam limits the declaration to a specified amount. It seemingly does not last forever.

96. Of course, *hataras nedarim* is about nullifying vows, but from the way the *Chachamim* instituted the nullification, we learn the correct approach to pledges.

97. See *Shach al HaTorah*, *Matos*, quoted by *Shaarei Teshuva*; *Birkei Yosef*, O.C 581; *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* (128).

Perhaps this hints not only to annulling *nedarim*, but to making them and following through. The hint appears at the ends of the words, because it is not just about making the pledge: it is about seeing it through to the end. Our *kabbalos* should last from the beginning of the year until the very last month, Elul.

Letters for Erev Rosh Hashanah

Acceptance of Suffering

To my friend from my youth, the chassid R'...

With the onset of the approaching new year, I bless you that the year and its curses shall come to an end, and the new year and its blessings shall begin, with a physical and spiritual healing, along with a bounty of children, life, and sustenance.

In light of that which I know of you—from your youth until today—it seems reasonable to say that your suffering is that of Divine love, which atones for and protects the generation. And although regarding the future, we pray to not receive “neither [the suffering] nor its reward,” nonetheless, for that of the past we can say, “Praiseworthy is your lot and vast is the reward that is hidden for you.” *Chazal* (*Berachos* 62a) have already said that acceptance of suffering consists of silence and prayer, which can be interpreted as meaning: silence—for what is already in the past, to believe that all is from Hashem’s love; and for the future, to pray with a whole belief that it is Hashem who hears the prayer of every mouth, and that He is closer to the brokenhearted and that He saves those of broken spirit. May it be His will that our prayers be accepted with mercy and favor. May you also bless me, Shaul ben Tziporah Faiga.

*Your friend,
Shaul Alter*

Preparation for Rosh Hashanah

...To recall all of the kindnesses, physical, spiritual, and financial, that Hashem has done for you, throughout the course of your life.

To be overcome with shame for how deficient we are in fulfilling His service, and to strive to undertake some good *kabbalah* (even if it is small, so long as it is firm).

And the main thing—to accept His sovereignty over all of our limbs and capacities.

*Kesivah vachasimah tovah,
Your friend,
Shaul*

Lessons from the Simanim

The Potential of Teshuvah⁹⁸

Our *minhag* is to eat sweet foods on Rosh Hashanah, in keeping with the pasuk (Nechemiah 8:10), אָכְלוּ מִשְׁמְנִים וּשְׁתוּ מִמֶּתְקִים — *Eat rich foods and drink sweet beverages*. We eat an apple dipped in honey, and ask Hashem to bless us with a sweet new year.⁹⁹

There is another type of “sweets” worth enjoying on Rosh Hashanah. The pasuk (Shir Hashirim 5:16) says, חֵכוּ מִמֶּתְקִים וְגֵלוּ מִחֲמָדִים — *His palate is most sweet, and all of Him is a delight*. How can we refer to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* as “sweet”? The Midrash¹⁰⁰ explains that this refers to Hashem’s anticipation and acceptance of Klal Yisrael’s *teshuvah*. The Midrash expounds: “There is no sweeter palate than this... Consider a person who was entirely wicked all his days, and at the end of his life became a pure

98. Rosh Hashanah 5783.

99. See Rema, O.C. 583:1.

100. Bamidbar Rabbah 10:1; Shir Hashirim Rabbah 6:1.

tzaddik. Still the pasuk says (Yechezkel 33:12), וְרָשַׁעַת הָרָשָׁע לֹא יִכָּשֶׁל בְּהַיּוֹם, שׁוּבוּ מִרְשָׁעוֹ – *as for the wickedness of the wicked person—he shall not stumble over it on the day of his repentance from his wickedness.*”

These are the “sweets” of Rosh Hashanah—that we are able to do *teshuvah*.

Rav Meir Shapiro had an outstanding *talmid* named Ephraim. One day Ephraim took ill. No avenue of medicine or treatment was left unexplored, but to everyone’s great sorrow, Ephraim passed away. In his *hesped*, Rav Meir Shapiro invoked the pasuk (Yirmiyahu 31:19), הִבֵּן יִקְרֵי לִי אֶפְרַיִם אִם,

יִלְד שֶׁעָשָׂעִים כִּי מִדֵּי דְבָרִי בּוֹ זָכַר אֶזְכְּרֶנּוּ עוֹד — *Is Ephraim My favorite son or a delightful child, that whenever I speak of him I remember him more and more?*¹⁰¹ Rav Meir Shapiro explained: הִבֵּן יִקְרֵי לִי אֶפְרַיִם אִם יִלְד שֶׁעָשָׂעִים — Ephraim was such a wonderful youth. But מִדֵּי דְבָרִי בּוֹ — whenever I speak of him, of how much he accomplished in his short lifetime, זָכַר אֶזְכְּרֶנּוּ עוֹד — I remember how much potential he had for עוד, for further, phenomenal growth toward becoming an extraordinary *talmid chacham*.

In its context, this pasuk is addressed to Shevet Ephraim, who committed serious *aveiros*. Why does their mention evoke such thoughts of positive potential? *Kadmonim* and *sefarim hakedoshim* say that when a person sins, the heavenly prosecutors are not allowed to mention it to Hashem. Just as one would never bring a basket of manure into a king’s palace, there can be no mention of sin before *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*. Instead, the *malachim* announce that a new manner of *teshuvah* has been originated.¹⁰²

The greater the sin, the greater the opportunity for *teshuvah*. Hashem declares, זָכַר אֶזְכְּרֶנּוּ עוֹד, מִדֵּי דְבָרִי בּוֹ — whenever I speak of him, זָכַר אֶזְכְּרֶנּוּ עוֹד — I remember how much potential he has for growth; even if he committed grave sins, he can do *teshuvah* and become great!

101. We recite this pasuk in Rosh Hashanah davening, as well as in the *haftarah* of the second day.

102. See *Zera Kodesh*, Rosh Hashanah s.v. *hasovel*; *Divrei Chaim*, beginning of *Noach*, who proves this from *Kav Hayashar*. See also *Avodas Yisrael*, *Bereishis* 6:14; *Sfas Emes*, *Nitzavim* s.v. *Ki hamitzvah hazos*.

The pasuk concludes with Hashem's great love for Bnei Ephraim: על — *Therefore, My insides yearn for him; I will surely take pity on him – the word of Hashem.* A person's feelings toward his fellow are reflected back to him.¹⁰³ Hashem's love for Bnei Yisrael reflects on our hearts, and ignites a yearning to come close to Him through *teshuvah me'ahavah*.

Quantity and Quality¹⁰⁴

The *Shulchan Aruch* writes¹⁰⁵ that we eat רוביא (black-eyed peas) on Rosh Hashanah night, and recite שירבו זכויותנו — *May it be Your will that our merits be increased.* The Rema adds the custom to eat pomegranates, with the request שגברו זכויות כרימון — *That we increase our merits like the seeds in a pomegranate.*

Having numerous *mitzvos* is important—that is symbolized in the pomegranate, which contains many seeds.¹⁰⁶ But quantity is not sufficient. Even the rebels of Klal Yisrael are as full of *mitzvos* as a pomegranate is full of seeds (*Chagigah* 27a). They are considered rebels because of the quality of their *mitzvos*, which were not performed wholeheartedly. Furthermore, a pomegranate can sour (*Berachos* 56a). In addition to the pomegranate, we also eat the רוביא, as a symbol of quality. We ask that each of our many *mitzvos* should be considered great in its essence, as if it were performed in the best possible way.

We say that Hashem is, הבודק ובודק גנזי נסתרות — *He Who probes and examines hidden archives* (*Mussaf*, Rosh Hashanah).

Sinners don't store their sins in archives; they prefer to forget any wrongdoing. The pasuk in Mishlei (30:20) describes the ways of sinners: כן — *Such is the way of an adulterous woman, she eats, wipes her mouth, and says, "I have done no*

103. כמים הפנים לפנים כן לב האדם לאדם — *As water reflects a face to a face, so a person's heart is reflected to him by another*, Mishlei 27:19.

104. *Rosh Hashanah* 5781.

105. O.C. 583:1.

106. Some cite a tradition that there are 613 seeds, corresponding to the 613 *mitzvos*.