**S.A.L.T. – ASERET YEMEI TESHUVA / YOM KIPPUR 5778**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

**At the request of Rav Silverberg, we are reposting Friday's dvar Torah, as it leads into today's dvar Torah.**

The Gemara in Masekhet Eiruvin (53b) cites the comment of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya that there were three times when he was “defeated” in the sense of being unable to defend himself against criticism. On these three occasions, somebody pointed out something wrong in his conduct, and he had no response. On one occasion, Rabbi Yehoshua told, the person who criticized him was a young girl; on another it was a young boy; and on another it was a woman who had hosted him for several days. We may reasonably assume that this woman was an innkeeper, or somebody from a distant community who hosted Rabbi Yehoshua when he traveled.

On one level, this account teaches us of the need to humbly accept criticism from anybody and from anywhere. Rabbi Yehoshua draws our attention to the fact that although he consistently held his own while debating complex, intricate halakhic topics in the study hall with the leading scholars of his time, young children and a simple innkeeper succeeded in putting him in his place. Every person we meet, young or old, has something for us to learn from, and we must be openminded and humble enough to accept guidance and even uncomfortable criticism from anybody who offers it.

However, there might also be another lesson to learn from Rabbi Yehoshua’s stories. It is perhaps no coincidence that all three of these people who succeeded in “defeating” him were people who were unaware of his stature of greatness. Two were young children, and the third was, presumably, a woman from a distant community. Rabbi Yehoshua’s peers, as well as those who lived in his surroundings and within his sphere of influence, and who thus acknowledged his stature as a towering Torah sage, would not likely have pointed out his mistakes. If they saw something he did that appeared wrong, they would have either given him the benefit of the doubt and figured that they misunderstood, or, out of respect for the rabbi, simply remained silent. The three people who criticized him did so precisely because they did not recognize his greatness and therefore did not treat him with such reverence that they shied away from offering criticism.

Rabbi Yehoshua thus teaches that respect often gets in the way of recognizing our faults and failings. As we embark upon the process of introspection and self-assessment, in search for the areas of our conduct that require improvement, we must view ourselves without the bias of reverence. We need to study our conduct and our beings the way those young, free-spirited children evaluated Rabbi Yehoshua – with simple honesty, without preconceived notions or perceptions of stature. Certainly, we need to view ourselves with a certain basic level of self-respect, or else we would not even care to embark on the process of self-improvement. At the same time, however, we cannot approach this process from a perspective of self-reverence, holding ourselves in high esteem such that we intuitively give ourselves the benefit of the doubt. We need to study ourselves with sheer objectivity, honestly trying to determine where we act properly and where we act wrongly. It is only with this kind of youthful brazenness towards ourselves that we can hope to identify our shortcomings and work to correct them.

Motzaei Shabbat

Yesterday, we mentioned the statement made by Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya, cited in Masekhet Eiruvin (53b), that there were three occasions when he found himself unable to respond to an argument. Rabbi Yehoshua was known as the most skilled debater among the Sages, and the Talmud tells several stories of his sharp-witted responses to his interlocutors and his triumphs in debates against the leading philosophers of his time. (See, for example, Ta’anit 7a, Chulin 59b, and Bekhorot 8b.) However, on three occasions he was defeated in an argument – once by a woman who hosted him in her inn, and twice by young children.

The first story told by Rabbi Yehoshua occurred when he lodged in an inn for three days, and on each of the first two days, he ate the entire plate of food that was served to him. On the third day, however, the woman added too much salt to the food, and so after his first taste, Rabbi Yehoshua could not continue eating. He politely excused himself, falsely claiming that he had already eaten earlier in the day. The woman said that he should have eaten less and saved his appetite, and also added that on the previous two days, he had failed to obey the rule that one should leave over a small portion of his food. Rabbi Yehoshua had no response to this woman.

The Chida, in *Petach Einayim,* explains the deeper meaning behind this story. The three days represent the three stages of a person’s life – youth, adulthood, and old age. During the first two stages of life, many people indulge, seeking physical gratification and material wealth, failing to leave over time and energy for loftier, spiritual matters. Then, when they reach old age and lose their “appetite” for pleasures and luxuries, and their health begins to decline, they finally turn their attention to meaningful, spiritual pursuits and regret their illicit, unrestrained behavior during their younger years. The lesson Rabbi Yehoshua seeks to convey is that repentance must be performed when we are still young and vital, when we still experience a craving for illicit behavior. *Teshuva* requires foregoing not undesirable, salty food, but delicious food which we very much wish to consume. It does not suffice to refrain from improper conduct which does not appeal to us; true repentance requires making sacrifices, relinquishing something we desire because we know it is forbidden, inappropriate, or valueless.

*Teshuva* is not a process that we can undergo on our terms, in a manner and to an extent which we find easy and convenient. In our *Yamim Noraim* prayers, we yearn for the time when “*yatu shekhem echad le-ovdekha*” – all people will “together bend their shoulder to serve You.” Accepting the yoke of God’s Kingship requires us to bend, to yield, to sacrifice what we want in humble submission to the Almighty’s will. And so even when we have “delicious food” on our “plates,” when we have all kinds of opportunities for enjoyment and indulgence, we need to have the discipline to abstain and withdraw for the sake of our service to God. True repentance is when we abandon not that which we in any event do not especially desire, but rather that to which we are indeed drawn, but we know should be forsaken in the interest of pursuing our spiritual ambitions.

Sunday

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya (in Eiruvin 53b) tells that once as he was traveling, he followed a path that extended through a field. He was observed by a young girl, who turned to him and asked, incredulously, “Rabbi, is this not a field?” The girl questioned how the rabbi could walk through somebody’s property. Rabbi Yehoshua explained that he followed a “*derekh kevusha*,” a paved path, which he had naturally presumed served as a public thoroughfare. Since there was a clearly-paved path running through the field, there was no reason for him to consider it private property.

The girl brazenly retorted, “*Listim kemotekha kivshuha*” – “Thieves like you paved it!” Meaning, this path became a trail only because insensitive people began walking there, trespassing through somebody’s property. The girl considered Rabbi Yehoshua a “thief” because although the path had already been formed, he had no right to walk through somebody’s field. Rabbi Yehoshua kept silent, having no response to this young girl’s harsh criticism.

The Chid”a, in his [*Petach Einayim*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=40654&st=&pgnum=187), explains that Rabbi Yehoshua here alludes to the more common phenomenon of people following wrongful paths simply because they have already been treaded upon by many others. So often, we blindly assume that a path is legitimate since we see or hear of other people following that course. Improper modes of speech and behavior, or watered-down standards of religious observance, become acceptable in our eyes because they have become common and widespread. Rabbi Yehoshua here teaches that one of the impediments to repentance and self-growth is this tendency to follow the treaded path even if it leads in the wrong direction, to assume that wrongful behavior which has become common may be considered acceptable. *Teshuva* requires the courage and fortitude to turn away from improper paths even when we see many other people treading along that path, and to adhere to our principles and values even when the people around us aren’t.

Monday

In the section of the High Holiday service that follows the *U-netaneh Tokef* prayer, we speak of the frailty of the human being, specifically, his mortality, describing him as “*yesodo mei-afar ve-sofo le-afar*” – “his foundation is from earth, and he is destined to [return to] the earth.” This description, of course, is rooted in God’s decree after Adam and Chava’s sin in Eden, when He pronounced death upon mankind, saying to Adam, “for you are earth, and to earth you shall return” (Bereishit 3:19). The prayer then continues the theme of human mortality, comparing human beings to broken pieces of earthenware, withered vegetation, a passing shadow, a brief breeze, and a moving cloud. This theme sets up the dramatic proclamation, “*Ve-Ata hu Melekh Kel chai ve-kayam*” – “But You are the King, the God who lives and endures.” The intent here is clearly to contrast the lowliness, helplessness, ephemerality and limitedness of man with God’s eternity and omnipotence.

It has been suggested, however, that the phrase “*yesodo mei-afar ve-sofo le-afar*” also conveys a deeper, more uplifting, perspective on the human condition. When, over the course of producing an earthenware utensil, the potter errs, or he drops the mold and it loses its shape, he can repair the damage with relative ease. As long as the vessel is still clay, it can be remodeled and reshaped, regardless of how deformed it became. However, once the model has been baked and become a complete product, any break is permanent. If the utensil is cracked, not to mention shattered, it can never become a perfect product again.

With this in mind, the comparison drawn in our prayers between the human being and pottery becomes especially trenchant. True, as we say later in this hymn, a person who departs this world is “*ke-cheres ha-nishbar*,” like a broken earthenware utensil, which can no longer be repaired. Once a person passes on, he no longer has the opportunity to grow, change and improve. However, we emphasize that “*yesodo mei-afar ve-sofo le-afar*” – throughout a human being’s life, as long as he still breathes, he is “*afar*” – clay that could be modeled and remodeled as often as necessary. A person does not become an actual “*cheres*,” a completed earthenware utensil, until he departs from this world. At every moment before then, at every stage of life, including during adulthood and even old age, a person is still “*afar*,” fully capable of being reshaped. Any deformity that occurs, and even utter ruin, can be corrected. Implicit in the gloomy, even morbid, description of man’s mortality in our High Holiday prayers is the message that as long as we are still alive, our story is still being written. Our opportunity for repentance and growth is limited only by virtue of our transience; it exists in full at every moment within the time-frame from birth to death.

Throughout our lives, we are to be involved in this process of shaping and reshaping ourselves, working to bring ourselves as close to a perfect final product as we can. Invariably, the “model” will, at different times, become distorted and deformed. The message of the *Yamim Nora’im* is that as long as God keeps us alive, we have the ability to repair all our “deformities,” to reshape ourselves into the perfect “utensil” that we want to be. No matter the extent to which we have bent ourselves out of shape, we are still “*afar*,” malleable like clay, entirely capable of improving, rising, advancing and inching closer to the perfection towards which we ought to be striving each day.

Tuesday

Our *Selichot* prayers are built around the “thirteen attributes of mercy” – the phrase used to refer to the verses in Sefer Shemot (34:6-7) in which God announces to Moshe after the sin of the golden calf His qualities of mercy and forgiveness, thus assuring forgiveness for that grave misdeed. We beseech God to “remember for us today the covenant of the thirteen [attributes],” the promise He made to Moshe to compassionately forgive us when we repent for our wrongdoing. This practice is rooted in the Gemara’s famous comment in Masekhet Rosh Hashanah (17b) that God told Moshe at that time that whenever *Benei Yisrael* sin, they should recite the “thirteen attributes” as part of their process of repentance and prayer.

There is some disagreement among the *Rishonim* as to what exactly the thirteen attributes are. The list seems to begin with two instances of the Name of God – “*Hashem Hashem*” – which do not, at first glance, appear to represent any type of “attribute.” Nevertheless, Rabbenu Tam, cited by *Tosafot* (Rosh Hashanah 17b), maintained that these words in fact constitute the first of the “thirteen attributes.” Rabbenu Tam’s source is the Gemara’s remark (there in Rosh Hashanah) explaining “*Hashem Hashem*” to mean, “I am Him before a person sins, and I am Him after a person sins and repents.” The Name “*Hashem*” (“*Havaya*”) signifies compassion, and thus “*Hashem Hashem*” is to be viewed as two attributes – referring, respectively, to God’s compassion towards us before we sin, and God’s compassion towards us after sin.

Many writers have questioned the relevance of an “attribute of mercy” before sin. Seemingly, the concept we are addressing is that of mercy and forgiveness in the wake of our wrongdoing. How can we speak of God’s compassionate forgiveness before we even sin and require forgiveness?

One of the answers given is that indeed, forgiveness begins even before we sin, in the form of God’s realistic expectations of His creations. What makes forgiveness possible is “*Ani Hu kodem she-yecheta ha-adam*” – God’s merciful outlook even before we act wrongly. He created us, and thus He knows, even better than we do, just how frail and vulnerable we are, and how difficult it is for us to consistently do the right thing. Even before we sin, He understands that we are, by nature, prone to sin, and this leads to “*Ani Hu achar she-yecheta ha-adam*” – His compassionate acceptance of our heartfelt *teshuva*. God forgives because He understands our frailty and weaknesses, and our susceptibility to temptation. And thus indeed, the “thirteen attributes of mercy” begin with “I am Him before a person sins,” with His compassionate view of us even before we err.

Elsewhere (Shabbat 133b), the Gemara instructs us to follow God’s model of compassion and mercy in our dealings with other people. It follows, then, that just as God’s compassionate treatment of us begins with His understanding of our frailty and inherently flawed nature, our compassionate treatment of our fellowmen must likewise begin with this outlook. The first, crucial step to being forgiving and tolerant is harboring realistic expectations, understanding that people are flawed, imperfect beings, and that every person deals with struggles and problems that we do not see. Just as we pray for God to take into account our innate flaws and our difficult struggles in judging us, we, too, must take human frailty into account in our dealings with other people, and treat them with the same patience and graciousness with which we want to be treated.

Wednesday

One of the verses we cite in our *Selichot* prayers, and repeatedly in our Yom Kippur service, is God’s promise relayed by the prophet Yeshayahu (1:18), “…[even] if your sins are like crimson wool, they shall turn white like snow.”

The Gemara in Masekhet Shabbat (89b) suggests interpreting the word “*shanim*” (“crimson wool”) in this verse to mean “years.” It thus explains this verse as saying, “If your sins are like these years, which are arranged ever since the six days of creation until now, they will turn white like snow.”

The Maharsha understands this ambiguous passage as simply underscoring the possibility of earning forgiveness despite the large number of sins committed. Even if one’s misdeeds are as numerous as the years that have passed since the time of creation, God is still willing and ready to lovingly accept his repentance and forgive each and every one of his sins.

Rav Kook, in [*Ein Aya*](https://he.wikisource.org/wiki/%D7%A2%D7%99%D7%9F_%D7%90%D7%99%D7%94_%D7%A2%D7%9C_%D7%A9%D7%91%D7%AA_%D7%98_%D7%A7%D7%9C%D7%90)*,* explains the Gemara’s comment differently, suggesting that the Gemara speaks here of habitual sin. People might mistakenly think that repentance is possible only for occasional misdeeds, but not for sins which have become habitual and part of our everyday lifestyle. The Gemara assures us that even if we have spent many years entrenched in sin, and we adopted forms of misconduct as part of our daily routine, we are still guaranteed the ability to change, to repent, to break our old – even very old – habits and to recreate ourselves.

An especially creative explanation of the Gemara’s comment is offered by Rav Yoshiyahu Pinto (“Rif”), in his commentary to *Ein Yaakov*. He claims that the Gemara here seeks to limit, not expand, the opportunities for forgiveness offered by repentance. Namely, God guarantees us readily available access to *teshuva* only if our sins are “arranged” according to “years” – meaning, if our misdeeds are normal for the ages and stages of life in which they were committed. Every stage poses its own unique spiritual challenges, and God, the Creator of every human being, is fully aware of these challenges and of how difficult it is to withstand them. And for this reason, we are assured that “normal” sins, wrongful conduct towards which we are naturally drawn, can be turned “white like snow.” Failures that occur over the course of the ordinary struggles faced by religiously-conscientious individuals can be turned “white,” can be entirely forgiven and erased. When it comes to outright evil, illicit behavior that extends beyond the type of mistakes that a person of that age and in that stage of life would commonly make, the “whitening” effect of repentance is far more difficult to achieve. But as for the normal human failings to which we are vulnerable, God assures us that as long as we truly seek and struggle to improve, and sincerely regret our mistakes and commit ourselves to avoid them in the future, they will be entirely erased, and we will be given the opportunity to work even harder to overcome our negative tendencies and inch ever closer to perfection.

Thursday

We begin the *vidui* (“confession”) on Yom Kippur by confessing the sins that we’ve committed “*be-oness u-ve’ratzon*” – “against our will and willingly.” Surprisingly, we confess to having violated sins in situations of “*oness*,” under extenuating circumstances that were beyond our control.

At first glance, this confession seems very difficult to understand. One of the most basic halakhic principles is that violators are not held accountable in any way for sins committed in situations of “*oness*,” when the violations were committed due to circumstances beyond their control. As opposed to situations of “*shogeig*,” where a violation resulted from a mistake that could have been avoided, such as if one violated Shabbat because he thought it was Sunday, in which case an atonement sacrifice is required, in situations of “*oness*” the violator is not held accountable in any way. Why, then, do we confess transgressions committed “*be-oness*” as part of our repentance on Yom Kippur?

One of the suggestions offered to explain this surprising confession is to read the words “*be-oness u-ve’ratzon*” not as two separate groups of sins, but as describing a situation where a willful violation is committed under the guise of “*oness*.” Oftentimes, we excuse ourselves from a certain obligation, or permit ourselves to do something wrong, with the claim that the law in question is too difficult for us to observe under the circumstances. The category of “*be-oness u-ve’ratzon*” refers to sins resulting from complacency, when we say “I can’t” as a cover for our lack of ambition and our decision not to invest the effort or make the sacrifice necessary to maximize our potential.

This approach is developed more fully by the *Penei Menachem* (Rav Pinchas Menachem Alter of Ger), in one of his published discourses (*Otzar Derashot U-ma’amarim*, pp. 170-171). Addressing the precise definition of “*oness*,” the *Penei Menachem* cites the comments of his grandfather, the *Sefat Emet* (Parashat Ki-Teitzei, 5634 & 5640), analyzing the Biblical source of the halakhic concept of “*oness*.” The Sages inferred this principle from the Torah’s discussion of rape in Sefer Devarim (22:23-24), where it establishes that a betrothed rape victim is not liable to punishment for the adulterous relationship, since she was violated against her will. This demonstrates that when a person commits a violation due to circumstances entirely beyond his control, he is not held accountable. However, the Torah adds that if the woman was assaulted in a city, where people could have rescued her, and she did not cry for help, she is not absolved from accountability on the grounds of “*oness*.” If a person committed a sin under duress, but did not seize available opportunities to extricate himself from the situation and thereby avoid the sin, he is held accountable and does not fall under the category of “*oness*.” The *Sefat Emet* noted that this demonstrates the limited scope of the rule of “*oness*,” underscoring the fact that it applies only if the person explored every possibility of escaping the situation in order to avoid the violation in question.

The *Penei Menachem* applies his grandfather’s insight to explain our confession on Yom Kippur for sins committed “*be-oness u-ve’ratzon*.” In this declaration, he says, we confess all the occasions when we lowered our standards claiming “*oness*,” that we had no alternative, when in truth we had other options which we lazily ignored. We confess all the occasions when we could have reached higher but conveniently convinced ourselves that we had already achieved the best we could hope for under our conditions. We confess all the occasions when we said we had no other choice, when in reality we did. We confess all the occasions when we did not “cry for help,” when we chose not to look for ways to help ourselves grow and improve. Right at the outset of the *vidui* service, we acknowledge, shamefully, that we could have done better, that many of our excuses are invalid, that out of complacency and laziness we preferred saying, “I can’t” instead of saying, “I’ll try.”

Friday

The Gemara in Masekhet Shabbat (118b) famously comments, “If only Yisrael would observe two Shabbatot – they would immediately be redeemed.” The simple explanation of this remark is that Shabbat observance is so vitally important that *Am Yisrael*’s collective Shabbat observance for just two weeks would suffice to render us worthy of our long-awaited redemption.

Rav Tzvi Elimelech Shapiro of Dinov, in his *Benei Yissaskhar* (Tishrei, 6), cites a Chassidic reading of the Gemara’s comment, explaining that it refers to the combined observance of Yom Kippur and Shabbat. The Torah refers to Yom Kippur as “*Shabbat shabbaton*” (Vayikra 16:31), and thus when Yom Kippur falls on Shabbat, we observe two Shabbatot, so-to-speak, simultaneously. According to the source cited by the *Benei Yissaskhar*, it is to this double observance that the Gemara refers when it speaks of the immense value of the Jewish People observing two Shabbatot.

The *Benei Yissaskhar* explains the significance of this observance based on *Targum Onkelos*’ translation of a verse towards the end of Parashat Mishpatim (24:11). The Torah there relates that upon beholding the sight of God’s Revelation at Mount Sinai, certain members of *Benei Yisrael* ate and drank. Onkelos, surprisingly, chose to eschew the literal meaning of this depiction, and interpreted this verse allegorically. He explained that the people at that time rejoiced over the acceptance of the sacrifices that were offered at Mount Sinai, and this joy brought them satisfaction as though they had enjoyed fine food and wine. A similar concept, the *Benei Yissaskhar* suggests, perhaps underlies the combined observance of Shabbat and Yom Kippur. Normally, Shabbat features an obligation of “*oneg*” – physical enjoyment through festive eating. Of course, when Yom Kippur falls on Shabbat, the Yom Kippur fast overrides the obligation to enjoy festive eating, and we must abstain from food and drink. However, the *Benei Yissaskhar* comments, in light of the aforementioned passage in *Targum Onkelos*, the obligation of “*oneg*” is not cancelled in such a case; rather, it is to be fulfilled through the spiritual delight of the Yom Kippur. Just as *Benei Yisrael* enjoyed the delight of the Revelation at Sinai as though they had enjoyed scrumptious food, similarly, we are capable of experiencing a level of joy equivalent to the physical gratification of eating through the Yom Kippur observance. At the time of *Matan Torah*, this joy was experienced through the excitement of knowing that the people’s sacrifices were accepted; similarly, on Yom Kippur, we can experience intense joy through the realization that God eagerly and graciously accepts our prayers and our repentance on this day.

Whether or not one accepts this seemingly strained reading of the Gemara’s comment, the *Benei Yissaskhar*’s insight offers us a valuable lesson about the joy of spiritual fulfillment. It reminds us that we can experience true joy and gratification even by abstaining from the physical delights to which we normally turn for enjoyment, to the point where even Yom Kippur can be experienced as a source of genuine “*oneg*.”

We might also add that the *Benei Yissaskhar*’s comments may shed new light on the famous association drawn by Kabbalistic teaching between Yom Kippur and Purim. These two occasions, of course, are observed in diametrically opposite ways, and yet Kabbalistic sources claim that the Torah’s term for Yom Kippur – “*Yom Kippurim*” – may be read as “*Yom ke-Purim*” – “the day which resembles Purim,” suggesting some resemblance between these two observances. The explanation, perhaps, is that just as Purim demonstrates that even our physical indulgence can be suffused with spiritual meaning, Yom Kippur demonstrates that spiritual engagement can provide enjoyment akin to physical gratification. On Purim, we devote the day to festivity and merrymaking in order to show that we remain connected to God and to spirituality even when we outwardly distance ourselves from the spiritual realm. (We thereby commemorate the condition of the Jews in Persia, who were deeply entrenched in the hedonistic culture of Persia, yet never completely lost their attachment to the Almighty.) On Yom Kippur, we do just the opposite, focusing our attention exclusively on our spiritual growth, neglecting our bodily needs as much as we possibly can without endangering our health, showing that we can experience joy and exhilaration even without satisfying our physical desires. Through the Yom Kippur observance, we send the powerful message – mainly to ourselves – that we can find joy, fulfillment and gratification not just from the mundane, physical pleasures of the world, but also, and primarily, through spiritual engagement, by working to serve our Creator to the very best of our ability.

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