YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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VARIETIES OF TESHUVA

by Rav Binyamin Tabory

 Rambam, citing the Sifrei, identifies avodat Hashem (service of God) with tefilla (prayer) and counts tefilla as the fifth mitzva of the 613. He maintains that although "le'ovdo bechol levavchem" could be considered a general mitzva which would not be counted among the taryag, this general statement has a specific application, namely tefilla. Apparently, although all our actions, deeds and thoughts should be channeled and directed towards God, somehow tefilla is the epitome of His Service. It is therefore interesting to note that Rambam also cites another opinion, namely that avodat Hashem can be equated with the study of Torah. It would seem that although the general approach to God is through tefilla, there are some who reach their height of spirituality through the intellectual pursuit of Torah.

 It is interesting to note a comment of the Gra, who undoubtedly personified the special level of avodat Hashem through Torah. The Gemara (Shabbat 31a) quotes a verse in Yirmiyahu and interprets it to mean that on the ultimate Yom Hadin (Day of Judgment), each person will be asked a number of questions: Did you handle your transactions ethically (be'emuna)? Did you set aside time for Torah study? Were you fruitful in this world? and so on. Chachmei hamussar cite this gemara to show that avodat Hashem must be demonstrated in all areas of life. Indeed, the first question asked on Yom Hadin does not seem to be about Torah or tefilla or Shabbat - it is about honesty and ethics.

 While the Gra certainly endorsed all these values, he raises a technical problem. Tosafot in Kidushin 40b point out that according to the gemara there the first question asked on Yom Hadin is about Torah studies; therefore, these two gemarot are seemingly contradictory. The Gra answers that all the questions in gemara in Shabbat actually do refer to the study of Torah. The first question is: Did you study Seder Zera'im (which is called Sefer Emuna)? The second question refers to Seder Mo'ed, the third to Nashim, etc. The centrality of Torah in the Gra's world of values is reflected in the fact that he interprets all six questions enumerated there as relating to the study of Torah in its entirety.

 As Yom Kippur approaches, our thoughts naturally turn to teshuva, tefilla and tzedaka. The Rav zt"l pointed out in a Kinus Teshuva that the Torah refers to Yom Kippurim in the plural. He explained the name as meaning the day on which we strive to attain kappara. However, the plural form shows that there are different ways to attain kappara. In his characteristically dramatic style, the Rav went on to mention various gedolim and to demonstrate how the Yom Kippur of each was unique and did not resemble that of any other.

 Although the classic approach to Yom Kippur must include teshuva, tefilla and tzedaka, in light of the Rambam's addition of Torah as the epitome of avodat Hashem there seems to be a special form of teshuva which relates to talmud Torah. Rabbenu Yona in Shaarei Teshuva (see fourth sha'ar, chapters IV, XI) avers that teshuva through Torah is effective even for sins which seem to be unpardonable. The prophet Yeshayahu said "Im yekhupar ha'avon haze lakhem ad temutun" implying that the sin of Chillul Hashem (desecration of God's Name) has no kappara at all. However, according to Rabbenu Yona, even Chillul Hashem has a "cure" through Torah. Pointing to the pasuk in Mishlei, "Bechesed ve'emet yekhupar avon," he explains that "emet" refers to the study of Torah leshem shamayim ("vetoratcha emet"), and goes on to advise that increasing talmud Torah can serve as protection from suffering. While the customary forms cannot be ignored, we see that benei Torah have an additional approach to teshuva - teshuva through talmud Torah. Of course, this requires commitment both in time and scope of Torah, but we remember "lo alecha hamelacha ligmor ve'ein ata ben chorin lehibatel mimena."

 May we all be zoche for teshuva gemura and have a gemar chatima tova lanu ulechol yisrael.