

Rosh Hashana

The central idea of the Ten Days of Repentance which begin with Rosh Hashanah is well known. Teshuvah would seem like an obvious concept but in no way is it so. Yonah was the only Biblical prophet that we are told had a relative educational success.

No other prophet, even Moshe Rabbeinu, managed to do this. Following his success, he asked to die rather than to agree with the idea of teshuvah claiming that it introduces a great lack of equilibrium which subverts the idea of justice. Teshuvah is something impossible also from a philosophical perspective. In theory, we are conditioned by our biology and psychology, coded genetically, and by sociology and history. A super computer that could be fed every single detail about someone and their context could accurately predict the next step in their lives.

However, the Jewish idea of Teshuva believes in the possibility of overcoming the burden we bear and say: today I decide to change and what until yesterday I did wrong will turn into good. The Rambam expresses this in his Mishneh Torah (Laws of Repentance 5:1): "All human individual is endowed with free will, if he wants to incline himself towards the good path, he is free to do so; if he wants to incline himself towards the bad path and be wicked, he is free to do so." The verb "to believe" in Teshuvah is fitting in this case, since it is probably impossible to demonstrate the possibility of teshuvah, but it is possible to believe in it. It is a sort of wager, with the awareness that we shall never have absolute certainty that we have won, but useful as a postulate to give meaning to our lives.

This wager, in order to be effective, demands a certain existential position vis-à-vis life. Again the Rambam expresses this brilliantly in his book (Laws of Repentance 7:2): "Each one should consider oneself as if he were on the brink of death, and fearful of dying in sin, he will repent from it immediately. One should not say: I will repent when I am old, lest he die before growing old." Each conduct is the last one, the definitive one, the one that is going to qualify all of your life. It sounds like an exaggeration, but if we wager on the idea of Teshuvah, it should be so, there is no other option.

Our tradition believes not only in the possibility of change, but also in the great responsibility we have when we behave in a particular way, considering our next action like the one that determines the kind of person that we will be. Let us remember that Teshuva is not a time bound commandment, that is to say, there is no set moment for change, rather all changes are compulsory. In a word, Teshuva is a lifestyle; the Ten Days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are just a reminder of this fact. Thus, the efficacy of these ten days should last us the entire year. If it were not so and we take this period as something specific, exclusive, unique and magical, to then go back to our day to day and our lack of consciousness of change and improvement at every movement, we shall not have succeeded in the task set by our tradition which constantly struggles against magical and childish patterns of thought, as is defined by some of our modern Jewish thinkers.

Life without the possibility of Teshuva is certainly lighter, easier to bear. Yet Judaism does not promise an easy life. We need to learn much from our mistakes and our suffering, which are the main factors in human development. When the Gemarah says: "Who ever suffers should check his actions." (Berakhot 5a), we are being taught to make the most of crises and to turn them into windows that peek into something new, an unthought-of possibility that comes into

being only by virtue of Teshuvah.
Shanah Tovah uMetukah !

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