

Throwing Off the Burden of Sin **The Real Meaning of *Tashlich***

By Rabbi Boruch Leff

We mentioned last week a vital outlook toward *teshuva* that we need to develop. Our thoughts are based on a *shiur* given by Rabbi Doniel Balsam of Baltimore.

This outlook is the secret of *teshuva* as expressed by *Rabeinu Yona* in a short essay entitled *Sod Hateshuva*, “The Secret of *Teshuva*.”

What exactly is the secret of *teshuva*? *Rabeinu Yona* quotes *Yechezkel Hanavi* (18:30-31) who tells us that *Hashem Yisborach* wants us to return to Him by throwing off all our sins and by imagining ourselves to be without any transgressions. We must feel that we have a *lev chadash* and *ruach chadasha*, possessing a new heart and a new spirit.

Of course, this does not mean that Hashem overlooks all sin and forgives us without cause and without regret and apology. We need to fulfill all of the steps of *teshuva* but the first phase of change, *Rabeinu Yona* tells us, is to perform *tashlich*, “*yashlich kol pasha'av asher asah, veyaaaseh atzmo k'ilu ki hayom nolad v'ain b'yado lo zechus velo chovah, vezeh hayom techilas maasav,*” we must imagine ourselves as if we were just born and we have no merits or demerits. This is the depth behind our going to a body of water on *Rosh Hashanah* and performing the *tashlich* ceremony. We are trying to create a feeling of throwing our sins into the water and starting over. *Teshuva* is real and if we feel sincere regret and have resolved to become better, Hashem will look at us as new people. We must look at ourselves the same, throwing off the guilt laden burden of our sins. As *Rabeinu Yona* says in *Sefer Shaarei Teshuva* (1:11) regarding the component of *teshuva* called abandoning the sin, *azivas hacheit*, we need to leave the *derech*, the general path of sin, to redefine ourselves and our way of life. *Rabeinu Yona* uses the word *derech* many times in this section indicating that we need to see ourselves anew, in general. We need to leave the old path and forge a new one.

Contrastingly, *Dovid Hamelech* (59:5) writes about his sin with *Batsheva*, saying “*Vechatsai negdi samid,*” my sin is always with me. This seems to go directly against what *Rabeinu Yona*, and really *Yechezkel Hanavi* suggest. Why didn't *Dovid* cast off his sin when doing *teshuva*? Why did he always keep it with him? The answer, Rabbi Balsam suggested, was that *Dovid* indeed kept the sin opposite him in the back of his mind at all times so as to avoid repeating his mistakes, but he did not let it define him and most importantly, he didn't let it hamper him. He never allowed himself to feel that just because he sinned in the past that he would sin in the future.

The sin was “*negdi,*” opposite him, but was not him; the sin was a separate, distant memory and act which did not weigh him down. As educators always preach, we must tell a child when necessary that he did something bad but not that he is a ‘bad boy.’ *Dovid* knew clearly that he transgressed and wanted to remind himself of that at regular intervals, but he never let himself feel so guilty that he felt hopeless to change. On the other hand, *Kayin* failed at *teshuva* because he couldn't let go of his sin and always

defined himself as a murderer. *Kayin* said, “*Gadol avoni m’neso*, my sin is too great to bear!” (*Bereishis* 4:13) He was unable to perform *tashlich* and see himself as a new and changed person. To perform *teshuva*, we need to forgive ourselves and *Kayin* was unable to do that.

The day we feel thoughts of repentance and return, we should not think of never sinning again for the rest of our lives but we need to take our challenges one day at a time, one challenge at a time. This is what Rabbi Abraham Twerski says is part of the meaning of the *posuk* in Shema, “*asher Anochi metzavcha hayom*-that which I command you today.” Hashem wants us to focus on today and only today. Then, when the next day next arrives, we focus on that day, and so on, day by day. *Teshuva* can really happen if we live life this way. This adds a greater insight into (*Tehillim* 90:12) where we ask Hashem “*limnos yameinu kein hoda*, teach us how to count our days,” so we can grow properly.

The *posuk* (*Mishlei* 10:27) says that those who fear Hashem have days added to their lives but the wicked lose years of their lives. Why is the term “days” used for *tzaddikim* while “years” is used for the wicked? *Rav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch* answers that to be a *tzadik* one needs to think in terms of days. If one tries to be good by thinking today of years of accomplishments, he will most likely not reach his goals and may even become wicked. This is what is meant by *Mishlei* (17:24), “Wisdom lies before an understanding person, but a fool's eyes are directed to the ends of the earth.” *Rashi* explains that a fool concentrates on the end, the goal, whereas a wise person thinks of the here and now, the process. He thinks only about what lies right in front of him now and that is the wise path. *Rashi* cites a *midrash* which says that the fool says, “How can I learn Torah? Each tractate contains 30 or so chapters! It's too much for me to handle!” But the wise man says, “Today I'll learn two chapters and tomorrow another two chapters and so on.”

As we perform *tashlich*, we must passionately resolve to see ourselves as new people who only want to grow closer to Hashem.

Contact the author at: sbleff@gmail.com.