

The Natural Jewish Consciousness of Teshuvah

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(based on a class given on *Tishrei 7, 5766* | September 9, 2005)

What is Teshuvah?

On the Shabbat that falls between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kipur, the *haftarah*—the supplementary reading from the Prophets—is taken from the final chapter of the Book of Hosea. In it, Hosea calls upon us to seek *teshuvah*, commonly translated as "repentance," but more correctly translated as "return": a return to God. The opening verse of the *haftarah* is: "Return O Israel unto *Havayah* your God."¹

Given that almost all of Hosea's prophecies preceding this final one warned of the impending punishment of God, the sages explain that nonetheless, Hosea's final prophecy is good advice that he offers us.² *Teshuvah* has the ability to avert God's punishment and subdue His anger. But, *teshuvah* is not only for those who have sinned. *Teshuvah*/return is a continuous, life-long process. One that Chassidut teaches us we should engage in every day and every hour of the day. Even a perfect *tzadik*—a person who has never sinned—needs to do *teshuvah*, to return to the source of his soul in G-d. *Teshuvah* is thus, not just a means to repent for ill-doing; it is a means for coming closer to the Almighty. Every person, regardless of how holy, can always return, i.e., grow closer to God.

There are a number of *Shabbatot* (pl. of "Shabbat") during the course of the year that are named for the *haftarah* read on them. The Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is therefore called either *Shabbat Shuvah* (the first word of Hosea's prophecy: "Return...," or *Shabbat Teshuvah*, being that it is a variation of the first word of Hosea's prophecy and that the ten days from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kipur are known as the Ten Days of Return—*Aseret Yemei Teshuvah*).

Teshuvah in One Leap, Teshuvah in Stages

In the daily calendar he wrote for 1943-4 known as the *Hayom Yom*, the Lubavitcher Rebbe relates that the Magid of Mezritch—the Ba'al Shem Tov's heir and spiritual son—explained to his holy students the meaning of these first few words of the *haftarah* in Hosea:

Prepared and distributed by Gal Einai Institute - Tishrei 5766 (September 2005).
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"...Return unto Havayah, your God...": your return, your teshuvah, should ascend high enough that God's essential Name, Havayah—which refers to His transcendent, unchanging, and unalterable nature that precedes creation and endures beyond it—will become "your God," Elokim—the Name of God that is associated with his immanent manifestation in creation, specifically in nature.

The Rebbe continues to note that all of the holy students were greatly aroused by this novel interpretation of the verse. But, the famous Rebbe Zusha responded to this teaching by saying that he cannot achieve such an enlightened state of return all at once. Instead, he needs to break his repentance down into stages (not necessarily ordered chronologically or by importance), the initials of which spell the Hebrew word *teshuvah* (תשובה). Rebbe Zusha said that the five stages or elements in his *teshuvah* would be:

ת – "You shall be earnest (תמים) with Havayah your God."

ש – "I see (שייתי) Havayah before me always."

ו – "And you shall love (ואהבת) your fellow as yourself."

ב – "In all (בכל) your ways know Him."

ה – "Walk humbly (הצנע) with your God."

The Rebbe dedicates another five of the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kipur to explain the inner meaning of each of these stages of *teshuvah*.

Rebbe Zusha was not the first to give a mnemonic based on the five letters of the word *teshuvah* in Hebrew to illustrate its meaning. In the times preceding the revelation of Chassidut (particularly, as related in an important work called *Reishit Chochmah*), a different mnemonic was commonly used:

ת – fasting (תענית)

ש – sackcloth (שק)

ו – and ashes (ואפר)

ב – weeping (בכי)

ה – lamentation (הספד)³

Indeed, Rebbe Zusha's mnemonic was either consciously, or unconsciously, meant to sweeten this earlier teaching, in the way that Chassidut sweetens the bitter and oftentimes overbearing approach to religious feeling and practice that preceded it.

Indeed, Rebbe Zusha's five stages of *teshuvah* lead one to fulfill the point of the Magid's teaching, that *Havayah* becomes your God.

Natural Consciousness

What is the essence of the Magid's teaching? What does it mean that you should ascend high enough that the transcendent, unchanging, and unalterable aspect of the Almighty, becomes imminent and natural for you?

There are *tzadikim*, holy and righteous individuals, who are always thinking about and invested in their connection with the Almighty. This would be a fitting description for many of the Magid's students. Why then would these *tzadikim* be so aroused by their master's teaching? For them it was natural to ascend and cling to God at the highest level. The novelty of the Magid's interpretation of the verse is the notion of natural Jewish consciousness that it illustrates.

Normally, a *tzadik* who clings and adheres to the Divine is consequently disconnected from mundane reality. This is called Divine consciousness. Why is this so? Why does clinging to the Divine preclude awareness of the mundane? When we would like to understand the meaning of a word and its primary context and application in life, we turn to the Torah to seek its first instance. The first time that the verb "to cling," לדבוק appears in the Torah is in reference to man's (Adam's) relationship with his wife: "For this reason, a man shall leave his father and his mother and he will cling to his wife, and they will become one flesh."⁴ From this verse, we learn that the essence of clinging is found in the relationship between a man and a woman. Clinging to God is similar to clinging to one's wife. As much as a man and a woman become "one," still, they are not really one thing. They are still separate. The same is true of clinging to God. As much as a *tzadik* may cling to the Almighty, he has yet to become absolutely one with God. He has yet to transform his nature such that it is God's nature. But, this is exactly what the Magid taught: that the ascent to God through *teshuvah* must be such that it leads to your nature becoming truly one with God, and then: just as God is both transcendent and immanent at the same time, so the Jew can be "above," and "below" at the same time. This is the essence of what we call natural Jewish consciousness, and it is achieved, according to the Magid's teaching by the means of *teshuvah*.

Said another way: when the transcendent and essential Name of the Almighty becomes natural for you, it no longer transcends nature, remaining external to your day-to-day life, but enters into your everyday awareness. The essential Name, *Havayah*, usually refers to God's miracles that contradict nature. The days of the Mashiach are a time in which the supernatural will become natural. Miracles will no longer appear as events that shatter the laws of nature, but rather as natural events that work miraculously within the bounds of nature.

Thus in order to do our part in bringing the Mashiach, we have to reach a state of natural consciousness.

To illustrate the teaching of the Magid in action, and how Chassidut yearns to truly manifest the Divine in our lives, let us end with a brief incident that is reported about Rebbe Levi Yitzchok of Berditschev. Rebbe Levi Yitzchok was always in a pronounced (i.e., externally obvious) state of spiritual arousal. One Passover Eve, just as the Seder table was set and ready, laden with food, matzahs, and expensive dishes, Rebbe Levi Yitzchak reached a very high state of arousal. He jumped on the table, spilling food and breaking the matzahs and cried out in Yiddish to the Almighty: "Either I go into You, or You come into me!" Indeed, in the state of natural consciousness, being above with the Divine, and having the Divine below with us, is one and the same.

¹. Hosea 14:1.

². *Yalkut Shimoni* Hosea, 531 in the name of *Pesikta Rabati*.

³. Based on Esther 4:3.

⁴. Genesis 2:24.