

## Teshuva Rebbe Zusha Style

Until the advent of the Ba'al Shem Tov and Chassidut, the process of *teshuvah*, (repentance) in the month of Elul and the Ten Days of Repentance from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, was filled with bitterness. In the books of morality (*mussar*) that preceded Chassidut, it was even written that the word *teshuvah*, is an acronym in Hebrew for fasting, sackcloth and ashes, weeping and eulogy. This would make *teshuvah* a very bitter experience, indeed.

Chassidut turns the entire experience of *teshuvah* around. One of the great disciples of the Ba'al Shem Tov was Rebbe Zusha of Anapoli. He said that for him, *teshuvah* is something completely different. It is a joyous renewal and deepening of his relationship with God. Rebbe Zusha also made an acronym of the word *teshuvah*: The first letter of *teshuvah*, *tav*, represents the verse, "*Tamim tihyeh im Hashem Elokecha*" ("Walk simply with *Havayah*, your God"<sup>1</sup>). The second letter of *teshuvah*, *shin*, is the initial letter of the verse, "*Shiviti Hashem lenegdi tamid*" ("I set God before me always"<sup>2</sup>). The *vav* of *teshuvah* is the initial letter of the verse, "*Ve'ahavta lere'acha kamocho*" ("Love your neighbor as yourself"<sup>3</sup>). The *beit* of *teshuvah* is the first letter of the verse, "*Bechol derachecha da'aihu*" ("In all your ways, know Him"<sup>4</sup>). And the final letter of *teshuvah*, the *hei*, is the letter that begins the verse, "*Hatznei'ah lechet im Elokecha*" ("Walk modestly with your God").<sup>5</sup>

These are the five stages of *teshuvah* according to Rebbe Zusha.

Walk Simply with God: The Basis for Simple Sincerity in the Soul

The Chabad Chassidic masters would expound upon every one of these stages of *teshuvah*—of renewal and deepening our relationship with God. The first stage of this process begins with simplicity, "Walk simply with *Havayah*, your God." The *mazal*, or spiritual symbol of the month of Elul, is the virgin. Although we do not attach importance to the astrological aspect of the *mazal*, as a symbol it does reveal something about the nature of Divine service during this month. The virgin represents the simple innocence of the soul. We must remain constantly earnest, which is no contradiction to being simultaneously very wise. Nonetheless, our souls should always be in a state of virginity—a state of earnest and innocent being with God. We must constantly strive for this innocent love of God, "I am to my beloved as my beloved is to me,"<sup>6</sup>—the verse that applies to the month of Elul and the Ten Days of Repentance, until Yom Kippur.

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 18:13.

<sup>2</sup> Psalms 16:18.

<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 19:18.

<sup>4</sup> Proverbs 3:6.

<sup>5</sup> Micah 6:8.

<sup>6</sup> Song of Songs 6:3.

From that state of simplicity, we attain the joy of the holidays of Sukkot and Simchat Torah.

#### I Set God Before Me Always: Renewal, Equanimity, Opposition

The second letter of *teshuvah*, the *shin*, represents the verse, “*Shiviti Hashem lenegdi tamid*” (“I set God before me always”). Setting God before me always means feeling the renewal of creation at every moment. This feeling of renewal imbues me with hope and encouragement. We can change at any moment, renew ourselves, improve ourselves and draw closer to God—for God renews all of His creation at every moment. This is the simple meaning of, “I set God before me always.”

Another meaning of *shiviti* (I set) is “equal.” The Ba’al Shem Tov learned from this verse that we should pursue the quality of equanimity. Meaning, that everything that happens to me is equal in my eyes. After all, everything emanates from the merciful God, including those things that do not seem good, at all. All is, in its essence, equally good.

A third deeper, explanation is that *lenegdi* (before me) is actually referring to those things that are against me, (*neged* means “opposing”). When something that I perceive as bad happens to me, I have to see God’s compassion and know that the bad things in my life come directly from His great compassion upon me. What can possibly be good about bad things? They nullify my inflated ego. As long as we have ego, we cannot cleave to God. So thank God for “always” creating opposition in my life and deflating my ego.

#### Love Your Neighbor: In Three Stages

The *vav* of *teshuva* represents the verse, “*Veahavta lere’acha kamocho*” (“Love your neighbor as yourself”). I must love my neighbor or friend as I love myself.

There are three levels to this love: One is “as yourself” —love your neighbor as you love yourself—but not literally. After all, your neighbor is not really you. It is written that in a situation in which only one person can survive, saving your own life takes precedence over saving someone else’s life. This is the lowest level of “Love your neighbor as yourself.

The Alter Rebbe of Chabad added the word, “literally” to the directive to “love your neighbor as yourself.” He said that you must love your friend “literally like yourself.” This also applies to husband and wife. They should be the best of friends. They should feel that they are both equal and one has no advantage over the other. This is the second, deeper meaning of loving your neighbor.

The third, even higher explanation is that “as yourself” means to love your neighbor even more than yourself. The sages say that a person who deserves the title “*chassid*” is someone who loves his neighbor more than he loves himself. If something can harm his neighbor, he prevents it from happening at all costs, even though he may be harmed in the process.

May God help us to attain this level—not to say that I take precedence under all circumstances, and not even that we are both equal (which is good). Instead, may we

reach a level of nullification in which my friend deserves to have everything, while I have enough reasons to recognize the fact that I do not deserve anything. I will give my friend everything wholeheartedly, trusting that God will help me to have what I need and that He will bless us with a good and sweet year both materially and spiritually.

“Know Him in All Your Ways”: Mindful Connection to God

The *beit* of *teshuvah* represents the verse, “*Bechol derachecha da’aihu*” (“In all your ways, know Him”). Let us contemplate on the word *da’aihu* (“know Him”). We must know God and connect to Him in all our ways. This is not referring to the commandments, but rather to our mundane reality—eating, drinking, sleeping and everything that we do. Everything in the physical world has a holy spark. We have to recognize God’s sustaining utterance from the food that we eat, for example, by eating so that we will have energy to serve God. The simplest meaning of “Know Him in all your ways” is to be mindful of my connection to God while performing my mundane tasks.

The sages also provide us with a deeper explanation: “Know Him in all your ways—even when sinning.” What does this mean? It is written that “A sin transgressed for the sake of Heaven is greater than a *mitzvah* performed not for the sake of Heaven.”<sup>77</sup> An example of a sin transgressed for the sake of Heaven can be found in the actions of Elijah the prophet on Mount Carmel. Once the Temple had been built in Jerusalem, it became forbidden to bring sacrifices outside the Temple. But Elijah brought sacrifices to God on Mount Carmel, in order to convince the Jews to return to God. It is obviously very difficult to know whether a transgression has been committed out of a higher purpose, for only God can truly see our heartfelt intent. As humans, cannot know what is going through someone else’s mind and we cannot judge them. Only God knows. But, if our actions are motivated by love of God, we fulfill the directive to “Know Him in all your ways—even when transgressing.”

May we never need to transgress, but we should understand the power of this sentence: “Know Him in all your ways—even when transgressing.” We must constantly be thinking about God, in all that we do, even when we have fallen. We must have confidence that God’s hand will stop our fall before we hit the ground.

“Walk Modestly:” Serving God with Modesty

The final letter of *teshuvah*, the *hei*, represents “*Hatznei’a lechet im Elokecha*” (“Walk modestly with your God”). The basic definition of modesty is that in my service of God, He and I are alone together. Nobody has to be privy to my relationship with God and I do not need to publicly demonstrate my service of Him, brag about it or even bring it to anyone’s attention. *Chassidim* throughout the generations always tried to conceal their good deeds. A good deed is between me and God, alone.

This verse emphasizes ‘walking:’ “Walk modestly with your God...” The first verse of *teshuvah*, “Walk simply with *Havayah*, your God” is also connected to walking, as many

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<sup>77</sup> *Nazir* 23b.

verses tie simple sincerity with walking. (He who walks with simple sincerity will walk with security,"<sup>8</sup> and "Happy are the sincere of path who walk with the Torah of God"<sup>9</sup>), and more. Our verse specifically refers to walking with modesty.

In God's chariot described by Isaiah, he sees the fiery angels, about whom it is written, "Six wings, six wings for one."<sup>10</sup> Every angel has six wings, divided into pairs: "With two he will cover his face and with two he will cover his legs and with two he will fly."<sup>11</sup> In our service of God, "with two he will cover his face" refers to positive embarrassment. There are both positive and negative forms of embarrassment. Covering the face with the wings represents positive, overwhelming shame, which is called *yirat boshet* in Hebrew. The two wings covering the legs represent the trait of modesty, "walk modestly" — the final seal of the *teshuvah* process.

The final two wings for flying represent passion for God—to fly to Him and to fly to my life's mission. All the levels—shame, modesty and passion—are necessary. May we merit holy shame, holy modesty and a great passion for our beloved God.

And may we merit to fulfill this process of return to God with great joy.

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<sup>8</sup> Proverbs 10:9.

<sup>9</sup> Psalms 119:1.

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 2:6.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*