

## 1.) Elitism and the Disdain for Mediocrity

1) **Elitist Tinge in Teshuva** On the one hand, when *teshuva* is successfully completed, it can have an elitist tinge. As *Chazal* say, “In the place where *ba’alei teshuva* (penitents) stand, even the completely righteous cannot stand” (*Berakhot* 34b, *Sanhedrin* 99a). In this respect, *ba’alei teshuva* constitute a sort of spiritual aristocracy. 97

### 2) **Elitism in the Messilat Yesharim Dangers of Elitism;**

*Mesillat Yesharim* can be divided into two parts. Roughly speaking, the first half addresses the qualities that one must possess in order to be what we may term a *tzaddik*. This requires following the law carefully; one must do what is expected of him and refrain from doing what he should not do. By contrast, the second half of the book is directed at one who aspires to be a *chassid* (pious person), defined by the Rambam as one who goes beyond the letter of the law in his deeds (101)

Nevertheless, the thrust of the elitism of the *chassid* is quite troubling, even depressing. Since one must be completely pure in order to be considered *tahor*, there are effectively no intermediate steps. This is an incredibly daunting prospect (102)

To some extent this notion is morally troubling as well. One might invest great effort in attempting to attain the level of *tahara*, only to slip up on some minor misdeed or impure intention, some peccadillo of thought or action. While this misstep may seem trifling, it is enough to disqualify one from the ranks of the pure. It is also distressing from a religious perspective, in terms of one’s *avodat Hashem*, that this classification should be so rigorous; such rigid classification feels almost oppressive. Finally, the standard of perfection here is so high that it is likely to deter many people from pursuing tahara in the first place. They may reasonably argue that while *tahara* is attainable for the *Chafetz Chayim* and those of his stature, it is far beyond their own grasp.

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Furthermore, if we indeed reach this conclusion, exalting and idealizing the process of *teshuva* and raising its demands to heights that are beyond the reach of the ordinary *beinoni*, there may be no greater way to weaken the resolve and determination of ba’alei teshuva. If one indeed asserts that tahara is the prerogative of the elect, and if there is indeed no middle ground between being blemished and unblemished, should the beinoni simply lower his spiritual standards, contenting himself with a middling spiritual life in general and a middling teshuva in particular? The idealization of elite *teshuva* can have an adverse effect on the *beinoni*, leading him not to intensify his spiritual effort, but to relax it. (104)

### 3) בשורת התשובה של התורה

#### א) דברים פרק ל

(יא) כִּי הַמְצוּהָ הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם לֹא־נִפְלֶאת הוּא מִמֶּךָ וְלֹא רִחֲקָה הוּא :  
(יב) לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הוּא לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲלֶה־לָּנוּ הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וְיִקְחֶהָ לָּנוּ וְיִשְׁמַעֵנוּ אֶתְּךָ וְנַעֲשֶׂנָּה :  
(יג) וְלֹא־מֵעֵבֶר לָיִם הוּא לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲבֹר־לָנוּ אֶל־עֵבֶר הַיָּם וְיִקְחֶהָ לָּנוּ וְיִשְׁמַעֵנוּ אֶתְּךָ  
וְנַעֲשֶׂנָּה (יד) כִּי־קָרוֹב אֵלַיִךְ הַדָּבָר מֵאֵד בְּפִיִּךְ וּבִלְבָבְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ : ס

ב) רמב"ן דברים פרק ל אבל "המצוה הזאת" על התשובה הנזכרת,

ג) תלמוד בבלי מסכת עירובין דף נה עמוד א והיינו דאמר אבדימי בר חמא בר דוסא מאי דכתיב לא בשמים היא ולא מעבר לים היא, לא בשמים היא - שאם בשמים היא אתה צריך לעלות אחריה, ואם מעבר לים היא - אתה צריך לעבור אחריה.

In light of this understanding, the verse constitutes a factual statement that carries with it both an element of reassurance and a persistent and total demand. If it is in the heavens, you must strap on a parachute and retrieve it. If it is beyond the sea, you must likewise go to the necessary lengths to reach the goals that the Torah has set forth. 106

Will it be perfect? Will it compare to the *teshuva* of the *Chafetz Chayim*? Certainly not. But the *teshuva* of the *beinoni* is also a form of *avodat Hashem*. God accepts this kind of *teshuva* as well, and it too has religious and spiritual significance. But the concurrent message is that one must do all that one can, exerting all the effort at one's disposal, harnessing all of one's energies and all of one's capacities in order to attain the noblest religious end

If we read these two messages together, they assert that we may be granted a **compassionate discount** with regard to accomplishment and attainment – God will be satisfied with whatever you are able to achieve – but not with regard to effort and exertion. 106-7

#### 4) General ethos of effort in Judaism

#### א) תלמוד בבלי מסכת מנחות דף קי עמוד א

מתני'. נאמר בעולת בהמה אשה ריח ניחוח, ובעולת עוף אשה ריח ניחוח, ובמנחה אשה ריח ניחוח, לומר לך: אחד המרבה ואחד הממעיט ובלבד שיכוין לבו לשמים

While this is not to suggest that one may relate to religious observance in a completely subjective manner, there is, at the very least, a recognition of the value of effort, irrespective of results. 107

This, of course, is quite a tall order. But again, we find reassurance in the recognition that results are not the only thing that counts. We gave it a good try, played the game by its rules, and are rewarded in kind. At the same time, playing the game by its rules means going all out. 109

## 5) View of mediocrity in General Culture

Broadly speaking, Jewish thought and Halakha do not contain the kind of disdain for mediocrity, or for the middle class as its representative, that is a pervasive theme in much of nineteenth-century literature. Neither does one find the kind of admiration and idealization of the animal, the primitive, and the unschooled that pervades a good deal of Romantic literature, nor the idealization of power found in much late nineteenth-century writing, including that of Nietzsche. In those sources, the mediocre were disdained for being bourgeois and philistine, “a nation of small shopkeepers,” as Napoleon said of England dismissively. The narrator in Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* stated that he wanted to be “either hero or dirt – there was no middle ground.” That is not an attitude to which we can relate; indeed, this approach is not endemic to our world. 109 napolean and dostoyoefskty

### 6) תפילת חנה -

**שמואל א פרק א (יא)** וַתִּדְרֹךְ נֶדֶר וַתֹּאמֶר יְקֹקֶץ צְבָאוֹת אִם־רָאָה תִּרְאֶהּ בְּעֵינֵי אֲמֹתָי וְזָכַרְתִּנִּי וְלֹא־תִשְׁכַּח אֶת־אֲמֹתָי וְנִתְּנָה לְאֲמֹתָי זֶרַע אֲנָשִׁים וְנִתְּנִיו לְיִקְוֹקֶץ כְּלִימֵי חַיִּיו וּמִוֶּרְחָה לֹא־יֵעָלֶה עַל־רֹאשׁוֹ :

### תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף לא עמוד ב

אמר רב: גברא בגוברין; ושמואל אמר: זרע שמושח שני אנשים, ומאן אינון - שאול ודוד; ורבי יוחנן אמר: זרע ששקול כשני אנשים, ומאן אינון - משה ואהרן, שנאמר: משה ואהרן בכהניו ושמואל בקוראי שמו; ורבנן אמרי: זרע אנשים - זרע שמובלע בין אנשים. כי אתא רב דימי, אמר: לא ארוך ולא גוץ, ולא קטן ולא אלם, ולא צחור ולא גיחור, ולא חכם ולא טפש

But according to one view in the *Gemara (Berakhot 31b)*, Chana was requesting “a child that is swallowed up among men” because he is so average and inconspicuous – not too tall and not too short, not too strong and not too weak, not too smart and not too stupid – completely average! 109

## 7) Invalid Mediocre Teshuva

Mediocre *teshuva* may be emotionally flaccid, halakhically pallid, spiritually insipid, limited in aspiration, lacking animation, and not driven by a sharp sense of guilt. 110

## 8) Valid “Mediocre” Teshuva

If, however, we try our best with our own talents and our own intellectual and moral powers, but we nevertheless fall short because of our confined ability, our constricted horizons, or inimical circumstances, our *teshuva* is wholly acceptable 110

## 9) Three Tests

There are three tests that can be used to ascertain whether *teshuva shelema* has been achieved: the question of initiative, the question of concomitant attitude, and the question of aspiration. 111

### a) Initiative

It means plumbing the depths, exploring our inner being, and acting on this exploration to the best of our abilities. While a more sophisticated person may reach a little more deeply than his less advanced counterpart, the critical factor is that every person at every stratum must search and examine. (115)

### b) Attitude

*Teshuva* is sometimes approached as a **cold duty** as well, including the element of searching and examining that we discussed above. When the Ten Days of Repentance begin, one might consult the Rambam and the *Shulchan Arukh* and find the law stating that one must do *teshuva* during this period. If one considers himself a halakhic Jew and a good soldier, he will do it – but it is a burden. He would rather not have to get up early for *Selichot* and undergo the various unpleasant ordeals inherent in the process of searching and examining himself. He does it, almost against his will, because he feels that he must. **But *teshuva shelema* must be genuinely meaningful, in terms of one's attitude.** Most importantly for our discussion, this quality of *teshuva* is just as pertinent for the mediocre as it is for the exceptional. **There is no reason that a person who is mediocre in religious talents should be less genuinely driven by the religious impetus for *teshuva* than a person who is religiously sharp** (116)

### c) Aspiration

But realistically, this kind of total transformation, this transmutation of the self, is a rarity. It is not easily achieved and not generally common. It may be one's goal or intended destination, but it cannot be considered thoroughly characteristic of the ordinary process of *teshuva*. 117

Indeed, there are many different levels of mediocrity, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Part of the element of aspiration in *teshuva* is a recognition of this spectrum, contrary to the perspective of *Mesillat Yesharim* that one is either in or out, with no gradation in between. We must recognize that *teshuva* is not simply a destination attained; it is a direction pursued. 117

(10) רמב"ם הלכות תשובה פרק ז הלכה א

הואיל ורשות כל אדם נתונה לו כמו שבארנו ישתדל אדם לעשות תשובה ולהתודות בפיו מחטאיו ולנעור כפיו מחטאיו כדי שימות והוא בעל תשובה ויזכה לחיי העולם הבא.

But here in chapter 7 the Rambam is speaking of the overall spiritual direction of a person's life, and in this context it is the striving that is crucial and central. It is a reflection of the fact that *teshuva* is a process and not necessarily a Rubicon that one must cross.<sup>117</sup>

## II. Partiality in Teshuva

(1) ויקרא פרק טז

(ל) פִּיבִּיּוֹם הַזֶּה יִכַּפֵּר עֲלֵיכֶם לְטַהֵר אֶתְכֶם מִכָּל חַטָּאתֵיכֶם לִפְנֵי יְקֹוֹק תִּטְהָרוּ:

(2) תלמוד בבלי מסכת יומא דף פה עמוד ב אמר רבי עקיבא: אשריכם ישראל, לפני מי אתם מטהרין, מי מטהר אתכם - אביכם שבשמים, שנאמר וזרקתי עליכם מים טהורים וטהרתם ואומר מקוה ישראל (ה') מה מקוה מטהר את הטמאים - אף הקדוש ברוך הוא מטהר את ישראל.

(3) רמב"ם הלכות מעשה הקרבנות פרק ג הלכה ד ישראל שהוא מומר לע"ז או מחלל שבת בפרהסיא אין מקבלין ממנו קרבן כלל, אפילו העולה שמקבלין אותה מן הנכרים אין מקבלין אותה מן המומר הזה שנאמר אדם כי יקריב מכם מפי השמועה למדו מכם ולא כולכם להוציא את המומר, אבל אם היה מומר לשאר עבירות מקבלין ממנו כל הקרבנות כדי שיחזור בתשובה, היה מומר לעבירה והוא מפורסם וידוע לעשותה והורגל בה בין להכעיס בין לתיאבון אין מקבלין ממנו קרבן לאותה עבירה, כיצד כגון שהיה רגיל לאכול חלב בין להכעיס בין לתיאבון ושגג ואכל חלב והביא חטאת אין מקבלין אותה ממנו.

## 4)Awesome and Overwhelming

Nevertheless, existentially, the demand for totality and comprehensiveness is simply awesome, even overwhelming. Can we merit the fulfillment of the promise, "For on this day He shall atone for you to purify you of all your sins," only if we have attained near perfection? Will our normal, stumbling selves, willing of spirit but weak and incontinent of flesh, plugging a hole here and leaving another there, be barred at the door? If few of us ever get beyond selective and fragmentary *teshuva*, will that *teshuva* then be dismissed peremptorily as inadequate? We only hope and pray that the answer is no. (49)

(5) תלמוד תורה

משנה מסכת אבות פרק ג משנה ח

רבי דוסתאי ברבי ינאי משום רבי מאיר אומר כל השוכח דבר אחד ממשנתו מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו מתחייב בנפשו שנאמר (דברים ד') רק השמר לך ושמור נפשך מאד פן תשכח את הדברים אשר ראו עיניך יכול אפילו תקפה עליו משנתו תלמוד לומר (שם /דברים ד') ופן יסורו מלבבך כל ימי חיך הא אינו מתחייב בנפשו עד שישב ויסירם מלבו

Analogously, with regard to partial *teshuva*, I believe we need to **distinguish between falling short and actively uprooting. If a person strives, out of a sense of commitment and engagement, for totality of *teshuva*, but moves on that path slowly and incrementally, encountering various difficulties such that he is unable to realize the whole of his aspiration – this is *teshuva* which strives for purification and thus, in a meaningful sense, attains purity.** But a person who works toward *teshuva* only in certain areas and who is unperturbed by the fact that other areas are untended may be said to be “uprooting” himself from those other areas. He may correct a particular sin and attain the *teshuva* of “they shall confess their wrongdoing.” But purity, under those circumstances, certainly cannot be attained. (50)

As we look to Yom Kippur, to what do we strive, what do we anticipate? At one level, we seek the *teshuva* of “they shall confess their wrongdoing,” ridding ourselves of various impurities, ferreting out and correcting (54) failings. We do this with an eye to comprehensiveness, if we can; but to the extent that we find ourselves honestly unable to attain comprehensive *teshuva*, we recognize the value of partial, even selective, *teshuva*. Still, this is always on the condition that we are never – never! – in the situation of “uprooting it from our hearts.” We confront the Almighty on Yom Kippur, having spent a year trying, in some way, to be a servant of God, having spent Elul and the Aseret Yemei Teshuva trying, **and yet acknowledging that after all that, we are imperfect and incomplete; and out of our imperfection, we plead and implore, hope and aspire. But we should be able to say, honestly, that if we are imperfect, it pains us. If we are incomplete, it grieves us. If we lapse and say to the Almighty that circumstances overpowered us, due to various pressures, problems, and difficulties, we cannot be indifferent. If we can achieve these feelings and attitudes, we can present ourselves as pure in one sense, even though we are not fully pure in another sense.**

#### 6) שבים VS תשובה

א) תלמוד בבלי מסכת יומא דף פה עמוד ב משנה. חטאת ואשם ודאי - מכפרין. מיתה ויום הכפורים - מכפרין עם התשובה

ב) תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבועות דף יג עמוד אמה חטאת ואשם אין מכפרין אלא על השבים, אף יוה"כ אין מכפר אלא על השבים

That means that according to the Sages, too, Yom Kippur is a day of grace and not just a response to merit. It is indeed a gift – the greatest gift – and is given to us not when we are fully accomplished, but when we are fully striving. We receive it not when we have attained perfection, but when we

aspire for it and recognize its worth. In order to attain that atonement of “you shall be purified before the Lord,” we seek to rid ourselves of impurities and acknowledge what our ultimate duty is in terms of its scope and depth. We present ourselves before the Almighty, trying, qualitatively, to intensify our connection to Him by focusing upon certain specific areas. (56)

### III. Foxhole Teshuva

#### א) תשובה מתוך צרה

**דברים פרק ד (ל) בַּצָּר לָךְ וּמִצָּאוֹךְ כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים וְשָׁבִתָּ עַד־יִקְוֶה אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְשָׁמַעְתָּ בְּקוֹלוֹ: (לא) כִּי אֵל רַחוּם יִקְוֶה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא יִרְפֶּךָ וְלֹא יִשְׁחִיתֶךָ וְלֹא יִשְׁפֹּחַ אֶת־בְּרִית אֲבֹתֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לָהֶם :**

**תלמוד בבלי מסכת מגילה דף יד עמוד א** ויסר המלך את טבעתו אמר רבי אבא בר כהנא: גדולה הסרת טבעת יותר מארבעים ושמונה נביאים ושבע נביאות שנתנבאו להן לישראל, שכולן לא החזירו למוטב, ואילו הסרת הטבעת החזירן למוטב.

**תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף פח עמוד א** אמר רבא: אף על פי כן, הדור קבלוה בימי אחשוורוש. דכתיב קימו וקבלו היהודים, קיימו מה שקיבלו כבר.

This second efficient cause, distress, strikes a pessimistic note – not only due to the fear of apostasy and retribution prior to *teshuva*, but due to the intimation that the road to *teshuva* is ordinarily paved with adversity. (69)

Yet, as pessimistic as the tone may be, the verses and the talmudic passages also resonate with a very reassuring note. Even if one’s *teshuva* is, in effect, foxhole *teshuva*, it is accepted by the Almighty. It is, to be sure, an inferior *teshuva*, presumably attaining lesser results.<sup>11</sup> But it is accepted. Moreover, whatever its catalyst

if the *teshuva* gathers momentum and becomes wholly genuine, it too may lead to hitherto unattained spiritual heights. The *Gemara* (*Shabbat* 88a) asserts that at the time of the miracle of salvation from Haman the Jews undertook a renewed and wholly volitional acceptance of the Torah. In the same vein, after the foretold calamities in *Nitzavim*, the subsequent verses (*Devarim* 30: 6) promise a quasi-messianic total commitment which, in the Ramban’s view (s.v. *u-mah*), signifies the very excision of the evil inclination and a return to the primal state of radical innocence within which man serves the Almighty wholly and intuitively.

#### ב) הבא לטהר

**איכה פרק ה פסוק כא הַשִּׁיבֵנו יְקוֹקָא אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְנִשׁוּבָה חֲדָשׁ יִמְיֵנו כְּקֶדֶם**

**איכה רבה (וילנא) פרשה ה כא** השיבנו ה' אליך ונשובה, אמרה כנסת ישראל לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא רבשי"ע שלך הוא השיבנו, אמר להם שלכם הוא שנאמר (זכריה א') שובו אלי ואשובה אליכם נאם ה', אמרה לפניו רבשי"ע שלך הוא שנא' (תהלים פ"ה) שובנו אלהי ישענו לכך נאמר השיבנו ה' אליך ונשובה

Rabbi Yehuda Ha-nasi claims that Yom Kippur atones even for those who are unrepentant. Yet even the Sages, who disagree with Rabbi Yehuda Ha-nasi, do not say that it atones only for those who perform complete *teshuva* by the deadline (see *Yoma* 85b, 87a). All they require is that one be among those returning, among those who are in the process of *teshuva*, aspiring toward rectitude and reconciliation, but not necessarily having achieved them. A person's aspiration to *teshuva* is not only something that the Almighty accepts, but is something toward which He impels, which He helps us mold. He is an efficient cause of the aspiration. He accords us the *chesed* of graciously accepting the *teshuva* we have wrought, in the spirit of "Bring us back to You, O Lord, and we shall return, renew our days as of old" (*Eikha* 5: 21). In addition, we may even envision Him as actively engaged in helping us on the road to

#### **IV. Joy in teshuva**

1) And to speak from my own interactions with the Rav z"l, if anybody needed something from him, the best time to speak to him was the night after Yom Kippur, when he was in the best mood of the year 216.

Or is there some saving grace, some element of joy inherent in the process that is licit and perhaps even demanded, despite the pervasive anxiety and the sense of tension? My personal, intuitive answer is an emphatic yes, but I need to elucidate my sources and reasoning. 217

**תלמוד בבלי מסכת מועד קטן דף יט עמוד א** רבן גמליאל אומר: ראש השנה ויום הכפורים כרגלים. וחכמים אומרים: לא כדברי זה ולא כדברי זה, אלא: עצרת - כרגלים, ראש השנה ויום הכפורים - כשבת.

**רא"ש מסכת ראש השנה פרק ד סימן יד** רבינו יצחק בר יהודה הנהיג במגנצא לומר והשיאנו בר"ה ויה"כ בשם רבינו אלעזר הגדול וכן רבינו משולם שאל את פי ראש ישיבה שבירושלים והשיבו שאומרים והשיאנו בר"ה ויה"כ

#### **2) Tzidkat Hatzadik – part 3 Tikkun Haberit #129**

The advice against this kind of inner doubt is the simcha and inner confidence that certainly God, in His great compassion and kindness, will accept him as having performed complete *teshuva* before Him, [while at the same time] he is filled with great bitterness over his sin. This [combination] is perfectly modeled after the *tekia-shevarim-terua-tekia* that is blown on Rosh Hashana, for it is known that the *tekiot* represent simcha, and the *shevarim-terua* represents the groan and the wail.... This

is why it is stated, “A song of David, when Natan the prophet came to him” (Tehillim 51: 1), for this [the joyful song even though Natan was accusing David of a terrible sin] is the flat (peshuta) tekia sound that is sounded before the terua, representing the simcha and song, confident that God will answer him.... And it is also truly a complete teshuva, for at that very moment, simultaneously, [he is surrounded by] the light and the revelation, and this is the joy that follows [the tekia] 225