

## Nourishment for the Neshama

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### Reflections on Elul 5768 before 5769

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As we approach Elul, we bring in the season of crowning Hashem the King. The King will enter the field and we will pass before Him to be inscribed for the next year, may we all be inscribed in the book of life for a year of health, prosperity, and an abundance of what we recognize as good.

For myself, I embark on a process to arrive at Rosh Hashana. To love Hashem means to love that He loves justice. As a limited person who makes mistakes and commits aveirahs, I do not particularly care to be the recipient of such justice, for most of the time I like to consider that I have done a pretty good job and that I can feel good about my conduct and mitzvahs. That would be my ego talking. We all like to think of ourselves as basically good and doing the right thing, having good judgment and executing things in a manner that is pleasing to Hashem. At least, I hope we all like to think of ourselves in this way. Surely I do.

What I have learned as I approach my 57<sup>th</sup> birthday (5 Elul) is that there is another perspective on everything I do. And yes, overall I may be getting good marks, but there is no such thing as perfect when we are in bodies. For this reason, when we understand there is another perspective, we have to understand that there is a process to arriving at Rosh Hashana, one where we cleanse ourselves of the inevitable imperfections and errors and aveirahs which are unavoidable, assuming a person is emotionally and intellectually honest with themselves.

Now here is the thing – many of us have fragile egos that often cannot admit that we made a mistake or confess any wrong-doing - we become angry and offended at the thought that we of all people might be punished for something we might have done. We are quick to justify our actions in human terms and feel we did no wrong. Without finding fault with this, since most Jews really do put much thought into their actions, I would bring this matter into focus in a different way.

I would suggest that the process of confessing ourselves and doing teshuva does not diminish one's self esteem but rather establishes one's self-esteem in two worlds. Yes, that brings in a two world picture. In fact, there is only Hashem and either we are serving Him in a manner that is pleasing to Him or He will find a way to utilize our actions for His purposes. Preferably for us, we are here to fix and mend things within ourselves so that we can draw closer to Him and merit Olam Haba through our actions in this proving ground of a world.

Often, we do not spend much time comprehending that there is more than Olam Hazeh to consider when making our decisions. Our instincts are self-interest- to take as much as we can in ways that we can justify. But in fact, a two world picture is something that we must wake up to. This area of emunah, this faith in Hashem, and our ability to build our faith and establish for ourselves a connection to Hashem within ourselves, needs to be a part of our decisions whenever we are at behira (at our free will point). Our

actions must meet a standard – are we doing things that please Hashem or not?

Why? Why do we have to consider doing things that please Hashem? It is because inevitably we have erred in our judgments and offered ourselves as a stick to hit someone else. No matter how well-justified we may feel, in Elul, we must recognize these things. Heaven forbid that we arrive at the Heavenly gates without having availed ourselves of this process while here in Olam HazeH, for there, it will not be possible to do teshuva and we will have to undergo a process of Gehinnon to cleanse us.

The primary reason in Elul to be aware of a two world picture and the process of teshuva is that when we confess ourselves to Hashem, when we regret our wrongdoings, it means that we recognize who and what we are...not only our good deeds and successes, but the struggle that it really is to be human and have limitations and weaknesses and emotions, and our gratitude that there is a Hashem Who stands ready to cleanse us. By standing before the Creator and confessing to Hashem what we know are our limitations, we silence the need to be accused from above. There is no need for Heavenly accusations when we ourselves have recognized ourselves. We may not regret our action – perhaps we regret an inevitable outcome of our action. Either way, we must recognize and be sensitive to what we produced in the previous year...did we produce constructive or destructive things?

From recognition and confession, kaparah and healing can occur. Without this confession, when we are blind to our faults or if we egotistically deny or rationalize them, we invoke the need to be accused from above. This is the system we live in, whether or not we like it does not change that this is the process of Elul. And we are all in the same boat...no one is exempt.

A healthy ego must have room to understand that we make mistakes and need to take responsibility for these mistakes. Pushing them away, not liking to hear that there is punishment and judgment in the world, or perhaps relying on segulahs - these will not provide the road to kaparah and healing that we truly do want (even though we don't know we want it). If we created destructive influences, our teshuva is required to remove them. When we understand that Hashem Loves us and wants to give us a clean start, a fresh year, a new beginning, we need to run with all of our negative deeds into His arms and beg forgiveness. Or, if we have caused damage to another, run to them and relieve them of the pain we caused by confessing and asking forgiveness. To presume at any time that we are above this is inherently a fault of ego, something for which we are surely to be accused.

I am not suggesting a decline into an unhealthy search into our weaknesses that will cause us headache and depression. Nor am I suggesting a cruel self-flagellation that triggers anger with oneself. Not at all. Hashem's perspective knows who we are and we are asked here to be accepting and honest, knowing that if we ask for His help, perhaps we will gain some ability to rise above our limitations. We are not to degrade ourselves so terribly as to be overwhelming. However, an honest appraisal of our strengths and weaknesses, blindspots and areas of confusion establishes us in two worlds on a healthy basis.

On the flip side, it is imperative that those who have been pained by the actions of another Jew prepare themselves mentally to forgive the person who may come to stand before them. Please remember that the Jew who comes to confess his wrongdoings is attempting to do teshuva and receive mechila from you. If you went through pain because of that person, that pain came from Hashem, who used that person as a stick to hit you. And now, that person, having regretted failing at their free will point, is now doing what he can to grow closer to Hashem. Ultimately that is what we all need for the redemption to come.

Forgive, forgive, forgive. Confess and ask for forgiveness from above, recognize our weaknesses and commit to working on them and forgive ourselves our process, and forgive those who come to us. When a Jew comes to ask mechilah, allow the pain you experienced to be a kaparah and forgive the good Jew who is standing before you.

Let us all merit to have a successful process so that we stand with no or very few debts on Rosh Hashana before the King! And may our teshuva generate rachamim in the eyes of Hashem so that He sends our Redeemer!