

ROSH HASHANA & YOM KIPPUR

by Rabbi Michael Schoen

The
Concept
of
Teshuvah

This understanding of how G-d judges an individual is apparent in the Rambam:

The concept of *teshuvah*, repentance, seems to be an illogical one. True, a sinner must change his ways: One who wishes to avoid incurring further punishment must clearly cease his sinning. Yet by what logic can a previous sin be forgiven? If one changes for the better, should he not still receive the punishment he deserves for the bad that he has done, as well as the reward he deserves for the good he is currently doing?

One might answer that since Hashem is all-merciful, in His mercy He wipes away our sins even though logically He has no reason to do so.

Whoever regrets the mitzvos he has fulfilled and wonders at his meritorious deeds, and says to himself: "What did I get out of doing them? Would that I had not done them," loses all of them, and no merit is remembered in his favor, as it says: The righteousness of the righteous shall not save him on the day of his wickedness—this is if he regrets his original [good deeds]...

(Rambam, Hilchos Teshuvah 3:3)

This insight of the Rambam proves that Hashem's "forgetting" our past is not merely a question of His mercy, for the concept can work against a man as well—one who regrets his past righteousness loses his accumulated reward. Surely, this is not an example of G-d's mercy.

When G-d judges an individual, He does not simply weigh his sins and mitzvos on a scale, with a *rasha* being one whose sins are "heavier." Rather, Hashem makes His judgment on the individual himself. What is he? What does he represent? Is he the embodiment of good or of evil? True, a person's essential being will depend upon the mitzvos and sins that he has done, but he is actually judged for the gestalt of his being, the whole and not the parts.

When a person truly regrets his past actions, he is stating that this period in his life does not embody him. When being judged for what he represents, those sins or those mitzvos that he regrets are not factors in judgment, since they do not represent him anymore.

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ROSH HASHANA:

BEGINNINGS...

by Rabbi Dr. Akiva Tatz

*"EVERYTHING
GOES AFTER THE BEGINNING."*

This statement of chazal contains hidden depth. The moment of conception of anything which comes into existence must contain all the elements of the future of that thing. Just as all the genes of a human being are laid down at conception and thereafter all the physical features which manifest in the child as it develops are results of those genes, so too all phenomena in the world are a reflection of the elements contained, infinitely compressed, in their beginnings.

The moment of transition from non-existence to existence is the most potent, containing all. Thereafter, as the child develops, a critical phase follows, but not as critical as the first instant, and so on, each phase a revelation of the coding of the previous. The closer to the beginning, the more critical. Small effects at the genetic level will be much more far-reaching than larger effects during embryonic development, and effects at embryonic level more far-reaching than effects at the adult level. Therefore, the

moment which demands greatest care, greatest intensity, greatest purity, is the very first.

Time is also a creation. The Jewish year is an organic entity. Its conception takes place on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. For this reason we are so extremely careful about trying to live correctly on Rosh Hashana and the subsequent days. The way one begins the year will determine how the rest of the year reveals itself. If one can form the genes of the year correctly, the fetus will develop correctly and the child and adult will be wholesome.

Mistakes in this phase will be very hard to correct later. Efforts made in the first ten days may prevent major "surgery" being necessary later. Each moment of Rosh Hashana should be utilized with exquisite care, only positive personality traits should be manifest, great control over anger and other negative traits should be exercised. Many have the custom not to sleep during the day of Rosh Hashana, at least not until midday – they want to lay down the genes of the year in consciousness and spiritual effort, not oblivion.

*There is a description
of a righteous person
as a tree planted in
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bad soil.*

When a person's sins and merits are weighed, the first sin that he sinned is not counted, nor the second, but the third and on [are counted]. If it is found that his sins—from the third and on—are greater than his merits, the [first] two sins are included and he is judged on them all. But if his merits stand against his sins, each of his sins is canceled one by one. The third is considered as the first, for the first two were forgiven. And thus the fourth becomes the first, for after all the third has been forgiven, and so on to the end...

(Rambam, Hilchos Teshuvah 3:5)

According to the Rambam, when calculating our sins against our mitzvos, Hashem does not count the first two times we sin. Bearing our explanation of *teshuvah* in mind, the reason for this is quite clear. The Gemara considers that an action must occur three times to establish a status quo (a *chazakah*). The first two times a person sins he had not indicated that he is a person who embodies that particular transgression. He simply is one who gave in to his evil inclination. Only after he transgresses three times can one say that he represents the sin itself, and as such can be judged for his embodiment of the evil, not for one particular sin.

Some of the ways of repentance are for the penitent to constantly shout before Hashem, with tears and pleas; to give as much charity as in his power; to distance himself from the object of his sin; and to change his name, as if to say: I am another, and am not the same person who did those deeds. He changes his actions entirely for the better, onto the straight path, and exiles himself from his former place of residence...

(Rambam, Hilchos Teshuvah 2:4)

How can the Rambam write that one should change his name and say he is someone else? According to our explanation this is exactly the point of *teshuvah*. One must declare that the periods and moments of one's life spent in sin do not represent him. He is a different person, represented by mitzvos, not by sins.



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What should be the major focus of the day? Can one really correct all ones' personality faults in one day, or even ten? The answer lies in a description of chazals' of the human being. There is a description of a righteous person as a tree planted in good soil whose branches overhang bad soil. The meaning is that the root is good, the person is essentially good, but no-one is perfect and the branches overhanging bad ground represent the person's shortcomings. However, some pruning will reveal roots entirely good. The pruning may take the form of suffering in this world – in the next world, the dimension of truth, the person will be revealed as wholly positive.

A negative individual is described as a tree planted in bad soil where branches overhang good ground. The root and essence are bad, but even the worst individual has positive actions and qualities. However, some pruning will reveal the essence as bad. The pruning may take the form of great happiness and reward in this world, leaving a clarified existence of negativity in the next.

This idea helps one to understand a difficult section in the Rambam. The Rambam states that on Rosh Hashana the righteous are sealed for life immediately, the evil are sealed for the opposite immediately, and those who are intermediate, neither righteous nor evil, hang in the balance until Yom Kippur. The Rambam says that these are people whose mitzvos exactly equal their aveiros. (Not necessarily in number, quality counts.)

The strange part of this discussion is that the Rambam goes on to say that most people are in this third category, that is exactly balanced between good and bad. Is it really possible that most people are exactly balanced in terms of their positive and negative actions?

The explanation, however, is that what is meant here is not an exact technical balancing of actions, what is meant is that most people are trees planted midway between good and bad soil – available for good and positive actions when the opportunity arises, when inspiration occurs, but unfortunately, available for selfishness and negativity when tempted.

Most people have never made a conscious policy decision about what they are here for. Where is your tree planted? Its default position straddles the line. What is required at the moment of conception of consciousness, at the moment of conception of time, is a decision about who I am in essence, not about which technical actions need work – that will come later.

Rosh Hashana is a time for moving the core, making sure the tree is moved entirely into positive territory, the pruning is the second stage. Consciously choosing a positive direction, setting a spiritual goal and beginning movement in its direction is what Rosh Hashana must teach.

Rabbi Dr. Tatz was raised in Johannesburg, South Africa. He has lectured internationally in the fields of Jewish Philosophy and medical ethics, and is presently a senior lecturer at Ohr Somayach Institutions in Jerusalem. His first book, the best selling *Anatomy of a Search* documents the personal, often dramatic stories of young men and women as they move from a secular lifestyle to the world of observant Judaism. Dr. Tatz's latest book, *Living Inspired (Targum/Feldheim)* is currently available wherever fine Jewish books are sold.