

**Pardes from Jerusalem - Weekly Parsha Podcast –
Parshat Vayeilech & Shabbat Shuva**

**Teshuva: תשובה – Déjà Vu perhaps? Cultivating the
spiritual practice of returning to, reclaiming &
renewing a moment from our past.**

This session addresses the spiritual practice of *Teshuva*. While the Rambam enumerates in *Hilchot Teshuva* the several *halachic* – legal - steps necessary to fulfill the act of *teshuva*, I will be sharing insights that address the consciousness shift inherent in the *teshuva* journey. I am referring to the practice when an individual intentionally directs one's thoughts, speech, and deeds in a way that allows for an encounter with the Divine within oneself, i.e. one's spiritual center. This practice is unique to each individual, being that it is a movement towards one's authentic unique self – to that space in each of us created in the Image of God; that special energy that the Creator gifted to each human being that we refer to as our soul. In other words, this practice reclaims, renews and moves us closer to an awareness that defines us as Godly --- a moment deeply implanted within us at conception.

1 – I will begin with a story:

In 1903, Rabbi Shalom Dov Ber Schneersohn of Lubavitch, known as the Rebbe RaShaB, went to meet Sigmund Freud in Vienna when he was 42 years old. They met on several occasions between January and April. Much of what they discussed centered around the relationship, or lack thereof, between **the mind** - one's thoughts - and **the heart** - one's feelings. The Rebbe RaShab was suffering from extreme exhaustion and was under great pressure, both internally and externally. He sensed that he needed to be more and to do more, admitting to his wife that he felt terribly deficient in his emotional attributes, which made it difficult for him to study. He felt that his love and awe of God and for his fellow human being was not as it should be.

This is what brought him to Freud. He traveled to Vienna, seeking help for himself. Freud noticed that the Rebbe was very weak, frail and tired. Clearly, Freud needed to know what the Rebbe did, how many hours he worked and what his daily schedule was like. The Rebbe replied that he was a bridge builder. Freud was very surprised at this answer. The Rebbe's frail condition did not exemplify the persona of the typical young, brawny and robust construction worker.

He asked the Rebbe, "So please tell me, what kind of bridges do you build"? The Rebbe replied: "I build bridges between the mind and the heart." Freud was intrigued by this answer and asked: "How do you do this? Are not the head and heart two continents, completely separated? Does not a great sea divide them? Is it really possible to do that?" The Rebbe replied: "The task is to build a bridge that will span these two continents, or at least to connect them so that the light of the mind should reach the heart as well. I must point out that for Chassidim, from birth, the matter of the mind and the matter of the heart are both necessary for study, devotion and self-refinement. As the Rebbe of my Chassidim, now you can understand why I am so tired." (*Sigmund Freud and the Lubavitcher Rebbe*, Stanley Schneider & Joseph H Berke, *Psychoanalytic Review*; Feb 2000, 87,1; based on the private diaries of the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, published in 1997).

What the Rebbe is teaching us here is that when engaging in the inner work of teshuva we need to bridge the abyss between the seat of logic in our minds and the seat of emotion in our hearts. It becomes highly problematic to experience the sense of being created in the Image of the Creator if the mind and heart, both equal manifestations of the Creator, are not aligned with each other.

*I can recall all too vividly the inner conflict I experienced so much of my life when my mind and heart seemed to be at war with each other, each pulling me in opposite directions. Have you as well ever experienced this? We need to both **understand** and **feel** - and traverse back and forth on the bridge between these two centers, these two continents, with some sense of ease. This is a form of teshuva that brings with it inner quietude and harmony.*

2 - Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi discusses in his magnum opus *Tanya*, published in 1796, the existence of two souls – two centers of consciousness - in each person. One soul, referred to as the animal soul, נפש הבהמית, is the source of energy we human beings have in common with all other living creatures. The need and innate drive to survive, eat & drink, procreate, and provide shelter derive from this soul. The second soul, referred to as the G-dly soul, נפש אלהית, is "a part of G-d from above, mamash – משמע." (Job 31:2). This soul is the breath of life, נשמת חיים, that HaShem blew into Adam's nostrils, which then bestowed upon him a life distinct from all other creations. While all creation possesses within it a spark of the Divine Creator, we human beings retain the privilege of being created in the very image of the Creator. Hence, our essential nature is to be G-dly. This indicates that the Divine Being that one returns to dwells within each and every one of us. And we have been created in such a way that innately we possess this drive to return to It --- in one way or another.

In the ever constant attempt to survive, grow, and "be" in this world, we may easily focus on nurturing and paying heed to the constant demands and needs of the animal soul, just as a farmer is duty bound to care for his livestock. To such an extent though, that we may forget that our G-dly soul needs tending to as well, and perhaps even more. To such an extent that we may not even feel connected anymore to our G-dly nature. To such an extent that we may no longer, G-d forbid, even believe it is there. So tending to the animal drives and urges within us as the priority in our daily lives comes with a high price - the deprivation of nurturing and providing for the needs of our G-dly soul.

Teshuva in this sense is both a turning and returning: turning our focus and intentions to our essence and returning to that part of ourselves that is eternal and not temporal within the finite limitations of time and place. We therefore turn and return to the very source of our being distinctly human. By identifying our essence as that of being special and unique, as being *kadosh* – sacred - as a part of HaShem, as spiritual, and then deciding to manifest that in thought, speech and deed, in effect we are cultivating the spiritual practice of *Teshuva*. And to our relief, this never has to be at the cost of depriving the animal within us its need to survive and thrive in the world as other animals do, but rather we live as holy animals and not wild animals.

3 - Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook discusses in his classic, *Orot HaTeshuva*, three stages in one's *teshuva* journey --- one leading to the next. This is indeed a process, a journey, and movement towards returning to one's inner true being in the most visceral way possible.

- The first step is *Teshuva Teve'it* - תשובה טבעית - where the individual senses in both one's own body and in one's thought that something is not right. Rav Kook uses the phrase to describe this as *דלדול ההיים* - the impoverishment of one's life force - a state of both physical and spiritual atrophy. One's actual physical health as well as spiritual health is compromised. This realization leads the person to want to restore well-being to oneself, and to return to a healthier state. Hence, Rav Kook refers to this as *תשובה טבעית גופנית* and *התשוב טבעית נפשית*. There is a direct connection here between the health of the body and soul.

- This leads the individual to the next stage, *Teshuva Emunit* - תשובה אמונית - where one's capacity to move ahead, or "return ahead" is based on believing in the Torah based sources as our guide and road signs along the *teshuva* journey. As an example, we internalize the belief that the Torah promises forgiveness for those who seek it - both within the individual and within the community and nation of Israel. Forgiveness in this sense, as

expressed by the prophet Hoshea in the Haftorah on the Shabbat preceding Yom Kippur, Chapter 14, 2-10, is more akin to support and encouragement. We read in verse 2: "Return Israel to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled in your iniquity." Hence, the tradition to refer to this Shabbat as "*Shabbat Shuva* – The Shabbat of Return." The iniquity that the prophet describes that we have stumbled upon, from Rav Kook's teachings, is living a life that does not embrace the purpose for which the Torah claims we have been created. And it's this very point that causes the ever sense of external and internal discomfort and disconnect; in other words the ever constant state of the spiritual existential threat. Following the practice of returning to our original purpose for which we have been created, verse 5 delightfully informs what awaits us, "I will **heal** their backsliding; I will **love** them freely..." This step in the *teshuvah* process moves the individual to a space where one can become inspired by the timeless wisdom found in Torah based sources.

- The third step in this process is actually living in a space of consciousness that Rav Kook refers to as *Teshuva Sichlit* – תשובה שכלית – this is living within the mindset of *teshuvah*. At this point one's very *teshuvah* brings the person to actually transform one's sins into one's merits. This is when our mistakes and mis-prioritizing causes one to sense such a painful state of distance from one's inner self, that this very distance from our spiritual center propels the person to return. This *teshuvah* is what, according to Rav Kook, everyone's eyes look towards. He understood how much we want to resolve our past and make it right. This creates a profound consciousness shift – a paradigm shift.

This type of *teshuvah* defines a way of living, of being. We become faithful to the Image of God in Whom we have been created --- with honesty, in truth, with dignity, self-respect, with honor --- as we move towards a Godly life, a life of the spirit.

4 - The Baal Shem Tov taught that if only we would remember that HaShem is always present, then all the facades of perceived concealment and distance would readily disappear and we would not feel lonely. Indeed, we would sense the Divine Presence. In this vein, Rebbe Nachman taught that whenever you sincerely cry out to Hashem saying, "AYEH?" - Hashem where are You - it's because you feel lonely. "Surely You are here – You must be here! Please do not conceal Yourself from me any more. I am seeking Your face!" This distance surely causes pain, sorrow, and perhaps regret. This concealment signals to us that there are parts of ourselves that require healing as a condition to once again sensing closeness with the Divine Presence. Indeed, the very calling out brings with it a sense of closeness.

The *Shechinah*, the Divine Presence, will reveal Herself to you. Even in this most difficult and lonely place that you find yourself in, Hashem will manifest closeness to you. Often when we are in the midst of our *teshuvah* journey, as we become so focused on righting that which was wrong, we forget to seek the closeness of HaShem. We must remember to 'mammash' truly ask of Hashem to sense closeness; we need to invite Hashem to be close to us, as we are mindful to be close to Him/Her. A deeper dimension of *teshuva* is to trust that HaShem is nearby --- right there in the midst of the felt concealment. We find ourselves called upon to have faith that the *Shechinah* is always nearby, even when She seems concealed and distant.

As I reflect on my own teshuva practice, I realize that I was and am inherently seeking a visceral experience with my own soul. Ironically, for many years, I found myself searching outside of myself by adopting others' practices to experience an inherent closeness to the Shechinah – the Divine Presence within. I've come to learn that at times like this I can always turn inwardly to HaShem to ask for help, for guidance and for inspiration, so as not to fall into despair.

5 – The Piaseczna Rebbe provides for us in *Derech HaMelech* an insight with deep and moving implications --- and inspiration. As taught by one of my teachers, Rav James Jacobson-Maisels, "The Piaseczna Rebbe teaches that *teshuva*, transformation, as taught by the Midrash, precedes even creation itself, for how could creation be possible if change was not already present. For that reason, the Piaseczna teaches us, we are never truly stuck. We are never lost. We are never condemned to repeat our old patterns. Rather, change is our nature and transformation is always possible. May we rediscover, this year, our faith in our own ability to transform, to return to who we truly are, and to live out our genuine selves in the world."

I hope that these teachings awaken all of us to cultivate the practice of returning to the place from where we were conceived, to that spark within each of us that is pure and loving, to our Godly soul – to the Image of the Creator in Whom we have been created. As we do, it is important to forgive ourselves for all those times we were distracted and made decisions that distanced us from our authentic being. While forgiving ourselves may seem like an insurmountable obstacle at times we can forgive ourselves, we must forgive ourselves, and as we do, then forgiving others comes natural. The teshuva journey enables one to experience those special sacred moments of intimacy...closeness with HaShem, with oneself, with fellow Jews and with all humankind, and all of creation. May we welcome each other home, to be at home with oneself, and may we embrace each others' journeys with compassion, encouragement and open arms.