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איה ודין שגסר יבא אמתה לסיג מקור רמור, סוף
לפי הג"ה, גליג החיים אדרנג אמתה של"ל טי"ס ויטי
בשמה גמור, אגרי סערים, אכסחזק ולמחז גיקן והמור
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SIMCHAH OF TESHUVAH

A POSITIVE APPROACH TO TESHUVAH

When you think about *teshuvah*, what comes to mind? In the minds of many people, *teshuvah* is associated with feelings of guilt that weigh down on one's conscience and cause emotional pain. But this is not the only approach to *teshuvah*. In fact, if we look at the sources in Chazal, we find that there is also a positive and joyful approach to *teshuvah* that will likely resonate better within us and also be more effective.

Rabbi Avraham Pam writes in *Atarah Lamelech*¹ that Rabbeinu Yonah in *Shaarei Teshuvah*, as well as other classical *mussar* works, approach *teshuvah* from a perspective of “destroying for the sake of rebuilding.” This means that they encourage a person to contemplate all his faults to the point where he recognizes how empty he is, full of sin and without merit. As a result of this piercing introspection, he will humbly do a complete repentance and properly rebuild himself.

Rabbi Pam writes that this approach was good for earlier generations or lone individuals in our generation who are of such an elevated level that they are able to grow from this approach.

However, for us, who are weak spiritually and quick to give up hope, this approach is more likely to cause harm than good...

1 *Atarah Lamelech*, p. 175.

The fire of sharp criticism will break us, and rather than inspiring within us a desire to correct and improve, it will instead fill us with despondency and despair, and there is no greater cause of loss than that.

Rabbi Pam recommends that our generation follow an alternate approach that is also suggested by Rabbeinu Yonah in his *Shaarei Avodah*. He writes:

The entrance to begin is for the person who serves Hashem to know his [great] value and recognize his [elevated] status and the elevated status of his ancestors, and their greatness and importance in the eyes of the Creator. And he should constantly try to strengthen himself to place himself on that level and to conduct himself in that way constantly. Every day, he should add strength to acquire those levels and traits that will bring him close to his Creator so that he can be attached to Him. Even if his beginning was small, his end will be very great...As a result, when he faces temptation to do something that he should not do...he should say to himself, "Someone so great and important as I, who has so many elevated traits and who is the son of such great people and kings of old, how can I do evil and sin before Hashem and my ancestors?"

Rabbi Pam goes on to recommend that every person find the area in *avodas Hashem* where he excels, whether it be in Torah, *tefillah*, or *chesed*. That is the area where he connects to the "Tree of Life," and it is his connection to *kedushah*. He should then build upon that area and use that area to grow. Rabbi Pam quotes the *pasuk* in *Parashas Nitzavim* that says, "For this commandment that I command you today—it is not hidden from you, and it is not distant...Rather, the matter is very near to you—in your mouth and your heart—to perform it."² Rabbi Pam quotes the *Ramban*, who explains that these *pesukim* are referring

2 Devarim 30:11,14, ArtScroll translation.

to the mitzvah of *teshuvah*. He suggests that we can interpret the *pasuk* as teaching that if you begin from the area that is very near to you, then you will find that the whole Torah is not hidden or distant from you. Begin in the area where you excel and build on it, and you will ultimately successfully expand your area to the entire Torah.

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler expresses a similar idea in *Michtav MeEliyahu*. He says that the approach of Chassidus teaches that “cold, introspective criticism silences a person’s strength to grow. A person needs to live and serve Hashem together with his physical nature, together with impurity, and the way to rid oneself of this impurity is only through the excitement of holiness.”³

Cold, introspective criticism will take a person away from feeling the excitement of holiness that is necessary to serve Hashem. Rabbi Dessler is teaching that in order to have the strength and energy to work consistently on growth, we need to focus on what it is in *avodas Hashem* that excites us and not focus on our shortcomings.

One of the greatest sources of joy is the feeling of satisfaction that comes from doing what is right and living a life of good. The flipside of this is that one of the greatest sources of frustration and depression is being frustrated by who one is as a person. Frustration of this magnitude interferes with optimal *avodas Hashem*.

There are countless sources in Chazal that teach of the importance of happiness and joy in serving Hashem. The Gemara in *Shabbos* tells us that the Shechinah can only rest upon someone who is in a state of joy.⁴ In fact, when the *neviim* would seek prophecy, they would use music to gladden their spirits so that they could be on the level of joy necessary to receive prophecy. There is no better way to attain the happiness and joy necessary to serve Hashem properly than by being satisfied with who you are as a person.

The *Rambam* writes at the end of *Hilchos Lulav*, “The joy that a person experiences in performing a mitzvah and loving God, who commanded us

3 *Michtav MeEliyahu*, vol. 5, p. 38.

4 *Shabbos* 30b.

in the mitzvah, is itself a great form of serving God. Anyone who refrains from this joy is deserving of punishment, as the Torah says, ‘Because you did not serve Hashem, your God, amid gladness and goodness of heart.’⁵

Serving Hashem with joy is expected of us, and it is also the primary method to reach elevated levels in our *avodas Hashem*. The Ari Hakadosh told his *talmidim* that the elevated levels he attained in *avodas Hashem* were a result of the joy he experienced in serving Hashem.⁶

One of the reasons why this is so, is that it is very difficult to focus on serving someone outside ourselves when our mind is enveloped by thoughts that constrict us to ourselves. Only when we feel internal joy and satisfaction are we able to free our thoughts from focusing on our own needs and wants and instead focus on serving Hashem and doing *chesed* for other people. This is why it is imperative for *ovdei Hashem* to be happy with what they have. The Mishnah in *Pirkei Avos* teaches us that only someone who is happy with what he has is truly rich,⁷ and the *baalei mussar* explain that one aspect of this is being satisfied with your own level of *avodas Hashem*.

The *pasuk* in *Koheles* says, “Sweet is the light, and it is good for the eyes to behold the sun! Even if a man lives many years, let him rejoice in all of them...”⁸ The *Shaarei Teshuvah* explains, “It is returning to speak of old age... Since the elderly can’t fully taste what they eat and drink... they should enjoy the sunlight, and they should not become frustrated (*tiktzar nafsho*), for frustration prevents a person from serving Hashem... He should not be a burden upon himself, rather all his years he should rejoice so that he not lose any of his years by refraining from serving Hashem.”⁹

The *Shaarei Teshuvah* is teaching us that pleasure and joy are necessities to be able to serve Hashem properly.

Aside from guilt, there is another emotion that we must address when discussing joyful *teshuvah*, and that is the emotion of fear. One of the

5 *Devarim* 28:47, ArtScroll translation.

6 *Sefer Chareidim*, Introduction.

7 *Avos* 4:1.

8 *Koheles* 11:7–8, ArtScroll translation.

9 *Shaarei Teshuvah*, chap. 2, *ha’derech ha’sheini*.