



Derasha – Rosh Hashana (2003) Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

The Gerrer Rebbe once met a young man learning at Ohr Somayach, a yeshiva mostly for Ba'alei Teshuva in Yerushalayim, and asked him where he learned. The young man replied that he learned at Ohr Somayach, but hastened to add, "But I am not a Ba'al Teshuva." The Rebbe did not hesitate before asking him, "Farvost nisht – and why not?"

Most of us don't identify ourselves as ba'alei teshuva. For some it is a matter of pride, and for others it is because it would be an inaccurate description. Inaccurate, not because we are frum from birth, but because we have never authentically engaged in the process of teshuva. But why aren't we all ba'alei teshuva as the Gerrer Rebbe suggests? Why don't we take teshuva seriously?

The word teshuva is often mistranslated as repentance. To repent is to feel remorse, contrition, and self reproach. Repentance implies that I must and I want to change because currently I am a loathsome sinner, despicable in the eyes of God and perhaps man. To repent means to condemn my current behavior and character and to reject my current identity. Repentance means change, and change is one of the most challenging tasks because it requires me to be unhappy with where I am now, it requires me to denounce my character. When thought of as repentance, teshuva is an unpleasant and painful chore. It is unnatural to be willing to knock ourselves down and introspect with such negativity. As a friend of mine put it to me this past week, "I am very happy with my life right now. I am not interested in changing anything and I don't want anything in my life to change." Why would we want to perform teshuva if it requires negativity, rejection, self reproach and worst of all change?

But actually, teshuva doesn't mean repentance at all. If you look at the root of the word teshuva you find the word la'shuv – to return, to come back. Teshuva is not about changing, it is about returning.

Returning to what? Coming back to where? When I constantly struggle to achieve spirituality and religious growth, how can I talk about returning if I was never there in the first place? How can I come back to a state that I never achieved?

The answer, my friends, is because in truth, we **were** all there. Elokai neshama she'nasata bi, tehorah hi – We recite first thing in the morning, "God, the soul that you place within me is pure."



We are born with a pure spirit and a pristine heart. For confirmation of this idea simply look at a baby. It is through the poor decisions, bad habits and addictions of our lives that our souls become tainted and sullied.

We are each born with an incredible potential of the type of unique person we could be. We could be humble, patient, honest, virtuous, sensitive, and spiritual. For each of us, there is the potential me, and then there is the actual, real me. Teshuva is about the process of returning to my origins, about coming back to actualize my potential.

The gemora in Rosh Hashana quotes a perplexing statement by Rebbe Yitzchak regarding God's judgment of us. "Amar Rebbe Yitzchok: Ein danin ha'adom elah l'fi ma'asav shel osah sha'ah – A person is judged only for his actions of that moment." As opposed to what? What is the other option that I be judged according to someone else's actions? The Talmud explains that it means as opposed to God judging us based on a prediction of indiscretion the future. However, I think there is an additional meaning.

I might think that I can turn to God and say don't judge me based on who I am now, look to the future and see my potential. Give me credit for the type of person that I could, and maybe will be. To this argument, Rebbe Yitzchok responds, No only l'fi ma'asav. It is our real actual selves that count. It is how I chose to live now, and what I make today of my potential that represents who I am and what I am worthy of.

The goal of teshuva, the object of returning is to bring our actual selves, our character, our behavior and our spirituality as close as possible to meeting our potential. The purpose of teshuva is not to knock ourselves down and denigrate our value, but to elevate us to be spiritual high achievers and to yearn to fulfill our potential.

You might say, Rabbi that is a nice message about teshuva, but how could that be what it means. Don't we stand on Yom Kippur and beat our chests with 100 statements of al cheit, for the sins I have done? The answer is cheit does not mean sin. In Judaism, there is no word for sin. The word cheit is used in tanach to mean an arrow that misses its mark. A cheit, is not a sin, it is a missed opportunity. We shoot arrows every day of our life. We often become complacent with only hit the most outer ring. Teshuva, is about getting the bullseye. Its about not missing opportunities and growing into the person we could be.

We find ourselves with 10 days left until Yom Kippur, but really we are in the middle of a forty day period that began with the first of Elul and that culminates with Yom Kippur. Interestingly, the number forty is always associated with change, and growth and with realizing our potential.

- In the time of Noach, when the world was undergoing a transition, the mabul, the flood lasted for forty days and forty nights.

- A mikvah, the source of returning and renewal must have a minimum measurement of forty se'ah.
- A fetus is only deemed having to have a neshama and not simply be tissue, forty days after conception.
- Moshe ascended Har Sinai to accept the Torah and forge the nationhood of the Jewish people for forty days.
- The Jewish people wandered the desert for 40 years
- Rebbe Akiva examined his life and began to change his ways when he was forty years old.

Change and forty go together, why? It is unusual for me to share a dvar Torah of this nature, but I think the following is truly a beautiful idea: Every letter in the Hebrew alphabet has an element that is nistar – hidden and an element that is nigleh – revealed. For example, the letter aleph is spelled aleph, lamed, feih. The Aleph is revealed, it constitutes the letter and the lamed and feih are hidden in the spelling of the letter aleph. This contrast between the hidden and revealed elements of the letter is true for every letter except one. The letter mem which represents the number forty is spelled mem mem. The hidden and revealed are identical. The visible and the hidden, the actual and the potential are the same. Forty signifies change because for change to occur there must be a congruence achieved between one's potential self and actual self. Growth occurs when we become closer to living the lives we are capable of, both in character and religious observance.

On Rosh Hashana we read the story of the Akeidah, the binding of Yitzchak. At the height of the story, Avraham challenged to sacrifice his own son, his legacy and future, raises the knife to slaughter his son. Vayikrah elav malach Hashem min ha'shamayim, va'yomer Avraham Avraham, vayomer hineini – An angel of Hashem called to him from heaven and said Avraham, Avraham, and he answered here I am. Did the malach have a stuttering problem, why did he call Avraham's name twice? He did so I believe, in acknowledgement and recognition that at **that** moment Avraham had succeeded in realizing his potential and in achieving greatness. Avraham Avraham – the Avraham in potential who could have such deep faith and trust to carry out an akeida, and the Avraham of reality became synthesized and merged into one.

Avraham accomplished the goal of teshuva, to have the nigleh, our actual lives, live up to the nistar, the hidden potential inside each of us.

We cannot – we must not - settle for mediocrity and be underachievers. Each and every single one of us is capable of greatness and of contributing in a brilliant way to our families, to our community, to the Jewish people and to the entire world.

Two hundred years ago, there was a nine year old boy who did not apply himself in his studies and there were no great expectations for him. One night when he was supposed to be in bed he overheard his parents talking in the other room

about his future. His despairing father cried that nothing he had tried – prizes, private tutors – seemed to have had any effect. Finally, his mother and father concluded that there was no choice but to apprentice him to a shoemaker or tailor and take him out of yeshiva. That night the boy went to sleep depressed and downtrodden and he had a dream. He dreamt that he was shown a bookcase full of beautiful seforim. There was a five volume commentary on Chumash called Ha'amek Davar. There was a three volume commentary on the She'iltos called Ha'amek Sh'eilah. There was a large set of responsa called Meishiv Davar and a commentary on gemora called Meromei Sadeh. In the dream, the boy leafed through the books and asked who wrote these brilliant works full of unprecedented insight? He was told these are the books that you were supposed to author. The boy awoke and promised from then on that he would apply himself with rigor to his studies. That boy went on to become the famous Netziv – Rav Naftoli Tzvi Yehuda Berlin the Rosh yeshiva of the Volozhin yeshiva and author of those great works. When he concluded the Ha'amek Sh'eilah he made a seudos hoda'ah were he told this story and added "imagine if he remained an underachiever."

Teshuva is not about knocking ourselves down, but rather about lifting ourselves higher to achieve what we are capable of. Each of us is capable of different things. Before we can realize our potential we must assess what that potential is in a realistic way.

Davening today is long and can be at times arduous and perhaps even boring. Take a minute or two and close your eyes and try to envision the potential you. Momentarily we are going to hear the blast of the shofar. Usually my mind wanders during this time in which we aren't designated something specific to focus on. This year listen to the shofar, close your eyes and envision your potential self. Let the sound of the shofar be an alarm to rise up from mediocrity and from being an underachiever.

It takes courage to change and to grow. It takes bravery to be willing to alter the status quo. But, just like a parent has expectations and dreams for their child of who they could be and what they could achieve, our father Hashem has the expectations of us. We don't have to be satisfied with who we are today. We have within us the capacity for change, for renewal, for return to the person we were meant to be, and to live the life we are capable of living.

Imagine what kind of mother or father you could be – what kind of time and patience you could give your children. Imagine what kind of husband or wife you could be – how you could be more sensitive and understanding or a better communicator. Imagine what kind of professional you could be – perhaps more honest. Imagine what kind of friend you could be. And imagine what kind of religious life you could live. Can you envision the potential to attend shul every day or at least Sundays in addition to shabbos. Do you have the potential to be

more careful about observing shabbos or about keeping kosher. Do you have the potential to put tefillin on every morning, or give more to tzedaka. Do you have the ability to study Torah regularly, either daily or weekly, by yourself or with your family?

Please, try this exercise and literally close your eyes and envision the potential you. It may be the most meaningful part of the davening for you. Set a character and religious agenda for the year. What would you like to change.

But make it realistic and personal. Each of us has a different, unique potential that we must strive to actualize.

When the Rebbe R'Zusia was on his death bed he began to laugh. The Chassidim asked him Rebbe, why are you laughing. He replied because I see when I come before shamayim they will ask my Zusia why were you not like Avraham Avinu and I will respond because you didn't make me Avraham. He laughed again, and again they asked to which he responded they will ask me why weren't you Moshe Rabbeinu and I will respond because you didn't make me Moshe Rabbeinu. Then the Rebbe began to cry and his Chassidim asked Rebbe, why do you cry. R' Zusia responded because now I see they will ask me Zusia, why weren't you Zusia.

We don't tolerate from our children an attitude of being an underachiever. We say they have so much potential, if only they would realize it. However, as adults we often have a low religious self esteem. We say I am not at the level of eating out only kosher or being careful about lashon harah or attending minyan regularly. We don't aim high and we are satisfied l'fi ma'asav, with mediocrity and the status quo. As my friend said, I am not interested in changing.

Teshuva is not just about changing; it's about returning and coming back. It's about aiming high and pulling ourselves up. When it comes to professional goals we are high achievers seeking to get to the next level of income, profits, perhaps a bigger house or nicer car. When it comes to our health we at least have goals even if they aren't always fully achieved of losing weight or lowering our cholesterol. We must have parallel goals for our character and religious life.

The gemora in bava metzia (85a) tells us that Yosi Ben R' Eliezer had fallen from the path of Judaism. He strayed from observance and spirituality. R' Yehuda Ha'Nasi in a brilliant way brought Yosi back to the path of teshuva not by knocking him down, but by lifting him up. What did he do? He ordained Reb Yosi and gave him the title "Rabbi." This was meant to encourage him but how could he do it when it wasn't true that he was a Rabbi? Rav Tzadok Ha'kohen writes (Tzidkos HaTzaddik 113) "It was not a lie to call him Rabbi because, when Reb Yosi's greatness was eventually revealed, it became obvious that it had existed there from the beginning, only it had been hidden."

Let us spend the next ten days searching for that which is hidden in each of us. Let us engage in teshuva, not changing ourselves into something new and alien, but returning to the neshama tehora that is – and always was - in each of us.



May we be spiritual high achievers, and over this year come closer to realizing our potential.

And, if asked may we respond with pride, "Yes I am a ba'al teshuva!"