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## There's Always Hope

The biggest impediment to changing is not believing change is possible. The first stage in Drs. James Prochaska and Carlos DiClemente's Stages of Change Theory is precontemplation. People in this stage are actively resistant to change. Often, this resistance is a result of previous attempts at changing that resulted in continual disappointments.

"Some precontemplators are so demoralized," they write, "that they are resigned to remaining in a situation they consider their 'fate.'" Once they give up, the problem usually spirals to even worse conditions. Not believing in our ability to change leads us to get stuck in our ways.

The curses that Moshe delineated in *Parshat Ki Tavo* were meant to serve as

deterrents to abandoning God and turning to other gods. In this week's Torah portion, Moshe addresses a subtype of individuals who may hear the threat of curses but react with indifference: "When such a one hears the words of these sanctions, he may fancy himself immune, thinking, 'I shall be safe, though I follow my own willful heart'" (*Devarim* 29:18). Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm identifies two streams of thought within the Aramaic translations of this verse, each pointing to a different possible explanation for why someone would ignore such warnings.

The first stream, which he calls "Immunity Theory," is based on *Targum Onekolos*, elucidated by Rashi. This person is so confident and obstinate and thinks that he will not be harmed by these curses. He believes he could act immorally and won't get caught. He is above the law, in his own eyes, and is thus impervious to consequences.

The second stream—what Rabbi Lamm deems the more common explanation—is based on *Targum Yonatan* and is what Rabbi Lamm calls "Despair Theory." The person acts not out of arrogance, but out of hopelessness. He thinks he has no choice. There is no ability to change. The evil inclination has him bound to repeat his behaviors. As is taught by the great Chassidic masters, and is later echoed by Prochaska and DiClemente, this despair will lead to even more sin.

The concept of *Teshuva*, which is a recurring motif in this week's portion, serves as the antidote to this despair. Repentance

“is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach... it is not in the heavens... [n]either is it beyond the sea... Rather it is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it” (*Devarim* 30:12-14 according to Ramban). While perhaps it isn’t always easy, *Teshuva* is always an option. Nothing, our Sages tell us, could stand before repentance.

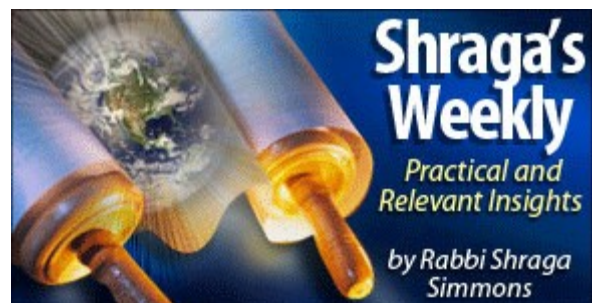
Even the apostate, Elisha ben Avuyah (known as *Acher*), who heard a Heavenly voice saying that “everyone can return except for *Acher*,” should have realized that even he could still return. There is always hope.

Rabbi Baruch Simon locates this idea within the first two verses of the *Parsha* as well. Everyone, we are told, stood before God. This included “your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water drawer” (*Devarim* 29:9-10). The fact that Moshe goes out of his way to describe the different types of individuals present, highlights the importance of realizing that everyone is unique, and everyone has a role to play.

We should never underestimate what our fellow can accomplish. Included in everyone, is ourselves. We should never degrade our own abilities. Even if we have come up short in the past, Rabbi Simon writes, we are forbidden from losing faith in ourselves. We must always believe in our ability to improve.

The goal of the month of Elul is to move us from being precontemplators about our

flaws to contemplators. To the extent that we have bad habits or behaviors that we have given up on changing, it is imperative that we shake ourselves out of this despair. We must believe that there is always hope. Nothing can stand in the way of repentance.



## The Apology Factor

*(a continuation of last week's theme...)*

A few years ago I learned a valuable lesson about apologies. I was sitting in a classroom and it was a few minutes past the time that the class was scheduled to begin. We were waiting for the teacher to arrive, and when one of my fellow students walked in, I gave him a warm and hearty welcome: "Hello, Alan!"

After the class was over, Alan came up to me and said: "I was so mad at you that I wanted to punch you!"

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

Alan explained. When he walked in and I said a loud "hello," he thought I was trying to draw everyone's attention to the fact that he was late.

Of course, that wasn't my intention at all, and the only reason that my "hello"

bothered Alan was because he was feeling self-conscious about his own lateness!

But then I realized: It doesn't matter whether I'm right or wrong, and whether my insult was intentional or not. The fact remains that I hurt someone's feelings. And for that I must apologize.

### **The Mechanics of Apology**

Next time somebody harms you and then comes to apologize, notice how he does it. There are two approaches people use — what I call the "sincere apology," and the "selfish apology."

The sincere approach is short and sweet, and sounds something like this:

"I'm sorry I hurt you. I'll be careful to see that it doesn't happen again."

Clean, direct, no excuses. If you'd been hurt, wouldn't you feel better after receiving such an apology?

Next is the "selfish apology." It goes something like this:

"I apologize. But I didn't do it on purpose. I had a hard day and I didn't realize what I was doing. And why are you so sensitive about this, anyway!?"

This person has verbalized an "apology," but it is hollow because they have no regret. They really feel "it's not my fault and I didn't do anything wrong."

The type of apology not only fails to appease the person who was hurt, it actually makes things worse. Why?

Because this "apology" is in effect saying:

"The fact that my actions were hurtful to you is not really my problem. And since I don't regret my actions, I will not make an effort to change them. Therefore if a similar circumstance occurs in the future, I would do the same thing and hurt you again!"

What came under the guise of an "apology" actually turns into a great insult.

### **Positive Effects of Apology**

Apologizing can be a difficult, humbling experience. We may feel vulnerable, low and bad.

But it doesn't have to be this way...

Imagine your jacket got stained. Of course you have to take it to the cleaners. But do you feel depressed when your clothes are stained? Of course not! You know that a stain is not a permanent part of the fabric.

Judaism says it's the same thing when we make a mistake. Our soul is the garment that gets stained. And we have to clean it. But making a mistake doesn't mean I'm inherently a bad person! In fact, the Talmud (Yevamot 79) says that a sense of shame is essential to the nature of a Jew.

A distinction needs to be made between "unhealthy" and "healthy" guilt. Unhealthy guilt is where you feel like a bad person. Healthy guilt is where you maintain the sense that you're a good person, while acknowledging that you used bad judgment and made a mistake.

Think back to a time you apologized. How do you feel afterwards? Cleansed! Getting it out is an expansive, cathartic, liberating

release. We cleanse the stain and recapture that lost purity. We rectify the past and move forward.

## Feeling in the Air

This week's Parsha begins: "You are all standing here today before God" (Deut. 29:9). Allegorically, this is referring to Rosh Hashana, the day when every Jew stands before the Almighty and takes a long, hard look at who they really are.

This is the time of year to make a commitment to correct our mistakes. God is "close" at this time, and as the verse in this week's parsha says: "God will remove the barriers from your hearts" (Deut. 30:6).

There's a feeling in the air. Let's use it!



## The Covenant of Mutual Responsibility

The study of the *parashah* is not only the study of our past, our present, our future, but most significantly, it is the Word of God. If you know how to study it and plumb its infinite depths, you will see that the *parashah* always gives illumination and enables you to better respond to the challenges of the moment. The reading of *Parashas Nitzavim* always coincides with

the High Holy Days and gives us guidance as to how we might best prepare ourselves for the awesome days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The stirring opening words, "*Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem lifnei Hashem Elokeichem* - You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem, your God,"[1] speak volumes. In *gematria* these words are the equivalent of "*La'amod l'selichos* - to stand before God and seek forgiveness." During the entire year we run from place to place, from activity to activity, and some of us run so fast that we forget why we are running, what our lives are all about.

But now, God's Day of Judgment is upon us and we are commanded to *stand still*, probe our souls, examine our hearts, and give an accounting of our lives. The passage goes on to enumerate the various strata of the population: the leaders, the elders, the officers, the men, the small children, the women, and the proselytes, down to the hewer of wood and the drawer of water. The question arises: Since the text already stated "all of you," why would the Torah find it necessary to mention each group separately? Surely they fall under the canopy of "all of you." So, since every word in the Torah is significant, why this redundancy?

The answer to this question can serve as our road map for life, and particularly for the season of High Holy Days. *We are all responsible one for the other. Our destiny is intertwined.* The Jewish people are like one body, and if just one joint is injured, the entire body hurts; if just one limb is amputated, the entire person is disabled.

Similarly, if just one of us is missing, we are all diminished; if just one of us is guilty of a grievous wrong, all of us are implicated. To impress this teaching upon us, all our prayers are said in the plural, i.e., *r'fa'einu* - heal *us* - *shema koleinu* - hear *our* voices, and so on. This teaching is especially relevant to us today, for we are the generation that has been destined to experience the travails that accompany the birth pangs of *Mashiach*. Our Sages teach that one of the ways in which we may protect ourselves during that difficult period is to unify, to forgive and feel for one another. If we can do that, we can anticipate that God will forgive us as well.

To further reinforce this concept of mutual responsibility, the *parashah* teaches us: "The hidden [sins] are for Hashem, our God, but the revealed [sins] are for us and our children forever, to carry out all the words of this Torah." [2] From this we learn that we will not be held accountable for sins of individuals who are unknown to us, but for those violations that are public, we are *all* liable, for our very silence signals our consent. In Judaism there is an adage: "*Shtikah k'hodaah* - silence is acceptance." [3] When we see a wrong, when we witness an injustice, when we see our Torah laws violated and abandoned, we have a responsibility to speak out and remind our brethren of their higher calling: to live as Jews by Torah Law.

This responsibility to remind one another of our God-given destiny, of our Jewish heritage, is, in and of itself, a covenant. In the holy tongue, it is referred to as "*areivus* - mutual responsibility. That is why, prior to

his death, Moses addressed each and every segment of the population and charged them all with this mission. Has this covenant of mutual responsibility remained the hallmark of our lives? Has it been borne out throughout the centuries? Yes and no.

On one hand, we, the Jewish people, can be separated by oceans and continents, language and culture; nevertheless, we have remained one. If our brethren in Russian, Ethiopia, or wherever they may be are oppressed, we hear their cry, and if our people in Israel are under attack, we are there. Yes, we are one. The covenant of mutual responsibility that Moses engraved upon our Jewish hearts has survived the centuries. But, on the other hand, we are also witness to alienation, complacency, and indifference. Those of us who are sensitive to this covenant of mutual responsibility must try to make all our brethren aware of it.

### WHAT IF IT'S BEYOND YOU?

It is not only for those who are oppressed or in crisis that we must feel responsibility, but for those who are Torah-deprived and Jewishly impoverished as well. If our brethren are unaware of the meaning of our faith, it is incumbent upon each and every one of us to do everything in our power to make them aware of our mutual heritage.

Some situations, however, are beyond our capability, in which assimilation has been so all encompassing that individuals no longer identify as Jews and there is no way for us to reach them. Such cases fall under the umbrella of *hidden*. It is God Himself Who will bring them home. When Moses

charged the nation with this covenant of mutual responsibility, he spoke to all of us, for all eternity. "Not with you alone do I seal this covenant ... but ... with whoever is not here with us today." [4]

From this we learn that every *Yiddishe neshamah* born in future generations was present and heard Moses' voice. Moses left nothing to chance, and in his message, he reminded us that God made His covenant with us for a special purpose: "[T]o establish you today as a people to Him, and that He be a God to you, as He spoke to you and as He swore to your forefathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." [5] This, then, is our mission, our *raison d'être* as individuals and as a nation. If we would only take a few moments to contemplate these words, we would be filled with a sense of exhilaration. We have been granted the awesome privilege of being God's people. Can there be a greater calling than that? Tragically, however, so many of our people are unaware and do not know their true essence.

### THE ETERNITY OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE

There is yet another interpretation to "*Atem nitzavim* - you are standing today, all of you, before Hashem, your God." In the previous *parashah*, the people were told of all the terrible and painful calamities that would befall them, and they became terrified. So much so, the Midrash teaches us, that they turned colors. Moses reassured them with the powerful opening words of our *parashah*: "*Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem lifnei Hashem Elokeichem....* You are

standing today, all of you, before Hashem, your God." In those words are to be found the secret of our miraculous survival.

No matter where destiny may lead us, no matter in which century, in which culture, in which country we may reside, *we must always see ourselves standing before God*; that is the secret of our miraculous survival. So it is that we have outlived the tyrants of history. We have seen the empires, the great powers of the world, soar to their zenith, only to disappear. From Pharaoh to Hitler to contemporary demagogues, we have experienced them all and triumphed, because, at all times, we stand before Hashem, our God. And even if we should forget our calling, the words, "*Atem nitzavim hayom*," come to redeem us. In *gematria*, that is the equivalent of "standing up for *Selichos*, asking forgiveness, and returning to God. The Almighty granted us a magnificent gift - *Selichos*, giving us the ability to rejuvenate ourselves by asking for His forgiveness. At first glance, this may appear to be an overwhelming task, but in this *parashah* we are also assured that "... 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 in your heart - to perform it." [6] This covenant is embedded in our souls and is so deeply engraved on our hearts that we need only call out unto God and the covenant will emerge and transform us into the people that stood at Sinai.

Throughout the centuries, we have seen the amazing renewal of our people. Even those who appear to be hopelessly lost, can

come back in an instant.

1. Deuteronomy 29:9.
2. *Ibid.* 29:28.
3. Tractate Yevamos 87b.
4. Deuteronomy 29:13-14.
5. *Ibid.* 29:12.
6. *Ibid.* 30:11, 14.

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