

Teshuva: Inspiration and/or Education

Rabbi Benjamin Hecht

In preparing a sermon, especially during the *Yomin Noraim*, the first question that a *rav* has to ask himself is whether he wishes to be inspirational or educational. There is a vast difference between the two. The goal of inspiration does not demand the imparting of any new information or knowledge; the actual content of the presentation is already known. The purpose of the speech is, rather, to energize, to arouse the emotions in the pursuit of the goal. The football coach's last talk before the game is the classic example of the inspirational speech. He will not say anything new but he will attempt to touch the hearts of the players so that they will reach their maximum potential. This is, indeed, a potential model for a sermon during these days.

The goal of education, though, demands the imparting of new information or knowledge for that is the very purpose of education. The focus in an educational presentation is the content with the goal of teaching something that the audience has not previously heard. This actually is all about change; forging a transformation through this acquisition of new knowledge. It is for this reason that an educational presentation is also most appropriate during the *Yomim Noraim*.

These two models of sermons actually reflect two different models of *teshuva*. In one way, *teshuva* is all about the energy. We know what we have to do, what is right and what isn't; the problem is actualizing the proper path. Sin, viewed from this perspective, is not deemed to be the product of incorrect knowledge but rather personal weakness. The way to combat sin is therefore deemed to be through strengthening one's resolve. *Teshuva*, thus, is deemed to be about energizing oneself, developing this resolve so that one can overcome the drives that lead us to sin. Viewed this way, *teshuva* can be seen to be about inspiration.

Viewed from a different perspective, though, the process of sin can also be understood as a result of a weakness in thought. We sin, we allow ourselves to succumb to drives that lead us astray, because of incorrect ideas, not truly seeing the foolishness of our actions. See, also, **T.B. Sotah 3a**. We sin because we are not thinking correctly. To combat sin, thus, demands of us to see the world correctly, understand ideas more succinctly and recognize the thoughtlessness of our improper ways. Viewed this way, *teshuva* can be seen to be about education.

Two different processes of *teshuva*. There are times that we know what is correct and what we need to do. The call in those cases is for inspirational *teshuva*, to summon within ourselves the necessary power to actualize the proper path. There are times, though, where we do not necessarily know what is correct and find ourselves stumbling due to this lack of knowledge. *Teshuva*, in such cases, must be educational. It must teach us the proper path, the proper method of decision-making so that we can find, and subsequently follow, the correct path.

The issue is, often, not just simply whether we know the correct path. The distinction in these two types of *teshuva* may, at times, lie in two variant definitions of the right path. Sometimes, it is easier to know the right path; in those cases, the problem may lie in our ability to follow it. Sometimes, though, it is more difficult to find the right path; the problem in such cases may lie in this very process of discovery.

One view of how we combat sin and act correctly focuses on *middot*, our character traits, and a process of defining and observing which ones to follow and which ones not to follow. Usually, in terms of a general perception of a trait, it is easy, applying concepts of Torah, to determine which *middot* are more positive and which are not so. For example, in broad terms, we would perceive generosity to be a positive attribute while aggressiveness would be a negative one. At this level, one wishing to abide by Torah would wish to undertake the development of his/her generosity trait while attempting to weaken his/her aggressiveness trait. This is a process tied to inspiration. What needs to be done is already clearly defined; the challenge is to actualize it. *Teshuva*, on this level, begins with the recognition that one did not follow the generally positive trait, followed a generally negative trait and that a transformation must occur by energizing the former *midda* and weakening the latter *midda*. This would be done by touching the emotions.

This, however, is only one view of sin. Another view of sin also focuses on *middot*

but with a different focus. Within this view, describing any *midda* as either positive or negative is a misnomer. *Middot* are deemed to be neutral. It is how you apply a *midda* that defines a positive action or a negative action. There are times to be generous and times not to be generous. Being generous when it is inappropriate to apply this *midda* can also be the basis of sin. Similarly, there are times not to be aggressive and times to be aggressive. Not being aggressive when it actually is appropriate can also be the basis of sin. At this level, one wishing to abide by Torah cannot simply undertake to develop or weaken specific character traits. One must apply the mind to determine when and how to apply a trait. This is a process of education. What needs to be done is not clearly defined; the emotion of a trait, even if generally positive, cannot simply be followed. A decision, applying thought, must be undertaken. *Teshuva*, on this level, begins with this recognition and involves a process of instruction, including self-instruction, on how one can make a wise decision in apply one's *middot*. This can only be done through the mind.

The difficulty involved in developing one's *middot* cannot be underplayed. The **Vilna Gaon, Even Shelaima** states that it is the most difficult task that we face. Yet, it is still only part of the battle. Even as we develop the positive *middot* and attempt to limit the negative *middot*, we still face the challenge that, at times, following a generally positive *midda* and/or not following a generally negative *midda* may lead to sin. We, thus, must develop our minds to make that decision as well. (For further consideration of this idea, see **Rambam, Shemona Perakim** and **Mishneh Torah, Hilchot De'ot, chapter 1**. The theme is also prevalent in **Rabbi Moshe Chayim Luzzatto, Mesilat Yesharim**.) This is the basic foundation of the two processes of *teshuva*. Inspirationally, we must work on our character, our emotional structure. Educationally, we must work on the process of still guiding our character with our minds.

For many, though, this structure of the basis of sin and, thus, the process of *teshuva* is very difficult to accept. Many wish to define the Torah experience solely within the inspirational model. The result is that, once a positive *midda* is identified, they wish to simply follow it; there is a problem, for these individuals, to accept that actualizing this trait could, at times, yield sin. This may be a reason why we read, on *Rosh Hashanah*, the Torah portion that includes the expulsion of Yishmael (and, his mother, Hagar) from the home of Avraham Avinu. (**Bereishit 21:9-21**). This was clearly a harsh act, contrary to a *midda* of *chesed*, caring for others. For the *ish hachessed*, the very personification of *chesed*,

Avraham, the very thought of doing this must have been disconcerting; no wonder that his first response to Sarah's request to do this was extremely negative. God, though, informed Avraham, not just to do this but that Sarah was right. Sometimes, following one's *midda* of *chesed* is incorrect. Even the most praiseworthy of *middot* must, at times, be restrained. Full *teshuvah* can only be achieved with this recognition. One must learn how to apply the mind in making a decision on what is correct and what is not. One cannot simply follow a generally positive emotion, even one as praiseworthy as *chesed*. This is an important lesson to hear on *Rosh Hashanah*.

This idea applies in regard to many positive character traits. While generally following this emotion will be positive, at times, the result could be extremely negative. Another example would be the *midda* of *anivut*, humility. Clearly this is another example of a character trait that is most praiseworthy, yet, **T.B. Gittin 56b** states that because of the humility of Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkolus the second Temple was destroyed. **Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, Igrot Moshe** points out that there is a time not to be humble but to accept the responsibility that comes with talent. Applying humility can lead one to not accept one's true abilities and the responsibility that comes with this recognition. The lesson is that there are times not to be humble even though humility is generally a most positive trait. *Anivut* is the very trait by which Moshe *Rabbeinu* is distinguished (see **Bamidbar 12:3**) yet even this trait, at times, must be quelled.

The same idea also applies to the *midda* of *tzniut*, gracefulness (although most people translate this word as modesty). This is another generally most positive character trait as identified by **Micha 6:8**, yet again, at times, this trait must be quelled. **Ramban, Shemot 21:8** states that one of a wife's rights in regard to her husband is to lie beside him unclothed. Ramban, thus, states that we should not act like the Persians who have marital relations in their clothes. **T.B. Berachot 8b** specifically mentions that one of the distinguishing marks of the Persians was their behaviour in line with the trait of *tzniut*. Various commentators state that one of the examples of this behaviour, based on **T.B. Ketubot 48a**, was that the Persians had relations with their clothes on. Ramban is effectively informing us that at times, such as in regard to this *mitzvah*, we are not to act as the Persians did, with *tzniut*. In most cases, indeed, generally positive *middot* are to be followed and these character traits must be developed. But we cannot simply, as I put it, "ride the wave", follow an emotion, even a most positive emotion, whatever the situation.

We are always called upon to oversee our traits with our mind

Thus there are two aspects of *teshuva*. We need to be inspired. We need the energy to follow the path of Torah and ensure that we have the ability to apply Torah's principles and directives. We often know what is demanded of us; the challenge is meeting that call. For this we truly need inspiration, the raising of the power of our positive emotions, the *rah, rah* of the football coach to get out there and win. Yet we also need to be educated and, more basic, open to education. We need to recognize that life is not always simple and that God demands of us to think, to meet the challenge of decision-making. For this we need education including the reflective re-investigation of our behaviour under the critical microscope of the mind. For this we need the insightful direction of the Torah scholar to teach us how to balance and apply correctly all our character traits. For this we need to recognize that meeting God's demands for us requires more than positive emotions. It requires thoughtful consideration. That is the other side of *teshuva*.

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