**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT NITZAVIM**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

Ashkenazic custom, as established by the Rama (O.C. 581:1), is to begin the *Selichot* recitation on Motzaei Shabbat – either the Motzaei Shabbat immediately preceding Rosh Hashanah, or, if Rosh Hashanah falls early in the week, then the Motzaei Shabbat of the previous week. The significance of beginning the daily *Selichot* recitation specifically on Motzaei Shabbat is reflected in the “*Be-motzaei Menucha*” hymn chanted during the first *Selichot* service, which begins, “*Be-motzaei menucha kidamnukha techila*” – “After the [day of] rest, we have begun to approach You [to beg for forgiveness].” As many have noted, there seems to be special importance to beginning the *Selichot* period, when we ask for forgiveness in preparation for Rosh Hashanah (and then in the days leading to Yom Kippur), specifically on Motzaei Shabbat, after observing Shabbat.

One explanation that has been suggested is that we begin *Selichot* after Shabbat because our minds have been cleared of our mundane concerns. Shabbat, which is famously described as “*me’ein olam ha-ba*” – an experience bearing some resemblance to life in the next world – is intended to be a time of complete contentment, free of anxiety, dissatisfaction and displeasure. Just as God completed the process of creation after six days, we, too, are to consider our workweek “creation,” our efforts to build, produce and earn a livelihood, complete when Shabbat begins. On Shabbat, we are to feel perfectly content with everything we have, and rid our minds of the worries and concerns that occupy us and drive us to work hard for a living during the workweek. The Shabbat experience should be one of serenity and repose, when we feel at ease with all we have, and can enjoy the many blessings we’ve received without worrying about what we need to do in order to obtain more.

It is perhaps for this reason that we begin *Selichot* specifically after Shabbat. If we would begin *Selichot* during the workweek, when our minds are filled with the normal pressures and anxieties surrounding our efforts to secure a livelihood, our thoughts and feelings during the *Selichot* prayers would likely revolve around those pressures and anxieties. We would reduce *Selichot* to nothing more than a chance to beg God for assistance in solving our personal problems and satisfying our material desires. By beginning *Selichot* after Shabbat, we are able to approach *Selichot* from a loftier mindset. After focusing throughout Shabbat on our joy, gratitude and contentment over our blessings, we can enter the *Selichot* period with higher, more meaningful goals. Emotionally unencumbered by our mundane anxieties, we can focus on our desire to enhance our relationship with our Creator, and our wish that God’s Kingship be recognized throughout the world (one of the primary themes of the Rosh Hashanah liturgy). Specifically after experiencing the special joy and serenity of Shabbat, we are in a position to enter *Selichot* with higher goals and aspirations, seeking not only the fulfillment of our relatively trivial personal requests, but also the realization of our spiritual ambitions for both ourselves and the world generally.

(Based on Rav Yaakov Glick’s *Ekhsof Noam Shabbat*, p. 12)

Sunday

The *Selichot* prayer service is built around the declaration of the “thirteen attributes of mercy” which God Himself pronounced to Moshe when Moshe beseeched Him for forgiveness after the sin of the golden calf (Shemot 34:6-7). These attributes begin with “*Hashem Hashem*” – the repetition of God’s Name. The Gemara explains this phrase to mean, “*Ani hu kodem she-yecheta ha-adam va-ani hu le-achar she-yecheta ha-adam ve-ya’aseh teshuva*” – “I am He before a person sins, and I am He after a person sins and repents.”

The simple meaning of the Gemara’s comment, it would seem, is that God promises to fully restore His relationship with us after repentance. He assures us that despite our wrongdoing, He is prepared to show us the same love, protection and care after we repent that He showed before we sinned.

However, many commentators found it significant that the Gemara speaks of God promising compassion “*kodem she-yecheta ha-adam*” – even before a person sins. This might indicate that we need God’s special mercy and compassion even before we have done anything wrong for which we require forgiveness. The question thus arises as to why special mercy is necessary even before one commits a wrongful act.

One of the answers suggested is that of the Mabit, in his *Beit Elokim* (*Sha’ar Ha-teshuva*, chapter 1), who explains that the Gemara refers here to the stage when a person plans to commit wrongdoing. Although it is clear that these plans will materialize, as the person is resolute in his decision to sin and there appears to be no obstacle to his committing the act, nevertheless, God does not judge or condemn the individual at that point. He mercifully withholds judgment until the act is committed, and does not rush to punish a person for his desire and intent to violate His word.

The significance of the Mabit’s explanation perhaps lies in the fact that God continues to believe in our capacity to refrain from wrongdoing even after we’ve planned to commit a forbidden act. Even if a person has firmly resolved to act wrongly, or has been habitually guilty of this act in the past, God does not hold the person accountable for the act that is all but certain to be committed, and instead trusts in the individual’s ability to refrain. It is only once the act is committed that the person is liable to punishment.

If so, then we must follow this example and trust in our own ability to reverse our direction. As thinking, independent human beings endowed with the power of free will, to choose between right and wrong, we are fully in control of our decisions until the act is done. At no point do we act under any kind of coercive force. If we have fallen into a habit of wrongful behavior, we still have the power to change our pattern of conduct and refrain from wrongdoing going forward. The concept of “*Ani hu kodem she-yecheta ha-adam*” shows us the extent to which God Himself trusts our power of free will, and believes in our ability to refrain from wrongdoing no matter how certain it appears that we will commit the act. And it thus teaches us to have this level of trust and belief in ourselves, and to recognize the power we have to make the right decisions and live the way God expects and demands that we live.

Monday

As part of the *vidui* (confessional) section of the *Selichot* service, we declare, “We have strayed from Your commands and from Your good statutes, and it was not worth it for us.” The simple meaning of this final phrase – “*ve-lo shava lanu*” – is that we now recognize that we lose by committing wrongdoing far more than we gain. When we act wrongly, we temporarily lose sight of the adverse consequences of sin, usually due to distraction or to the appeal of the forbidden act. As we stand before God to confess, we acknowledge our mistake, and affirm that violating God’s word is, always, the wrong decision, that we are never better off disobeying His command, regardless of the benefits we receive as a result.

Rav Eliyahu Meir Bloch, however, is cited as having offered a different explanation of the phrase “*ve-lo shava lanu*,” suggesting that it be read it as, “it is not worthy of us.” Meaning, we declare that we are better than our conduct, that our wrongful conduct is unbecoming of us. The process of repentance should not be an exercise in self-deprecation, but to the contrary, an effort to reaffirm our nobility and dignity. As we confess our sins, we acknowledge that they stand directly at odds with our true selves, with our essence. “*Lo shava lanu*,” according to Rav Bloch, means that we and wrongdoing are mismatched; sinful conduct simply does not fit our true nature.

Although the month preceding Rosh Hashanah is customarily observed as a time of repentance, the period formally designated for *teshuva* by the Gemara (Rosh Hashanah 18a) begins on Rosh Hashanah and extends through Yom Kippur. We might suggest that as Rosh Hashanah commemorates the day of Adam and Chava’s creation, it marks the onset of the period of intensive repentance because it reminds us of the essence of the human being, our inner spark of sanctity with which we were created. *Teshuva* means recognizing that as human beings endowed with a divine image, sin simply has no place in our conduct. On the day of the creation of the human being, we begin to reflect upon our potential, our capabilities and our capacity for greatness, and we then recognize how far short we have heretofore fallen from our potential. This recognition should then lead us to true repentance, to confessing our failings and committing ourselves to improving and closing the gap between who we are and who we could be. *Teshuva*, then, is not simply about acknowledging our failures, but also about acknowledging our inner potential, affirming that we are capable of being so much better, and resolving to take a step forward towards maximizing our capabilities.

Tuesday

The Torah in Parashat Nitzavim tells of *Benei Yisrael*’s repentance after being exiled from their land, and God’s promise to return them from exile in response to their repentance and prayers. God promises that He will bless the nation with great prosperity “because you shall heed the voice of the Lord your God, observing His commands and statutes that are written in this book of the Torah, for you shall return unto the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul” (30:10).

The Torah here seems to emphasize the fact that the people will “heed the voice of the Lord your God” as a result of their “returning unto the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul.” Rather than simply state that God will bless the people in reward for their obedience, the Torah stresses that they will be rewarded for obeying God’s commands “for you shall return unto the Lord your God” – a point which seems to be obvious. After all, this entire section speaks of the people betraying God, suffering punishment, and then repenting. Quite obviously, then, the people now “heed the voice of the Lord” because they have “returned unto the Lord your God.” Why, then, is this point emphasized?

This difficulty was implicitly noted by Ibn Ezra, who explains, “it [the Torah] will not be observed unless the heart is whole; therefore, [the Torah emphasizes,] ‘with all your heart’.” In other words, the Torah here emphasizes that we can be said to “heed the voice of the Lord your God” only if we “return unto the Lord your God **with all your heart and all your soul**” – meaning, if we serve Him with sincerity. According to Ibn Ezra, the type of obedience for which the nation will earn reward is that which stems from a commitment of “all your heart and all your soul” – a commitment that is wholehearted and genuine.

Ibn Ezra’s explanation is further elucidated by Rav Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, in his *Meshekh Chokhma* commentary, where he notes that the verse speaks of observing all the laws “that are written in this book of the Torah.” The laws in the Torah text cannot be properly observed without the interpretation of our oral halakhic tradition; if we approach the text without these interpretations, we are bound to fail to properly fulfill our obligations. For this reason, Rav Meir Simcha writes, the Torah emphasizes that the people will obey God’s laws because they will repent “with all your heart and all your soul.” If we are not sincere in our quest to fulfill the will of God, then we will end up interpreting the Torah’s laws subjectively, in a manner that suits our personal preferences, intuition and biases. Therefore, in discussing repentance, the Torah emphasizes that we must approach repentance with a genuine desire to obey God’s commands without projecting our own predisposed attitudes onto the text. *Teshuva* requires opening our minds in an honest effort to determine what God expects of us, and then to meet those expectations. Without this honesty, if our “repentance” is not done with all our heart and soul, with complete sincerity, then we will end up serving not God, but rather our own interests. And thus the Torah emphasizes that *teshuva* must be performed “with all your heart and all your soul,” out of a genuine desire to understand and fulfill the word of God, without misinterpreting His word to accommodate our personal agendas and preconceptions.

Wednesday

One of the verses which have been incorporated into our *Selichot* prayers is David’s plea, “Do not cast me at the time of old age; when my strength is depleted, do not abandon me” (Tehillim 71:9). (In Tehillim, this verse is written in the singular form, as formulated by King David – “*Al tashlikheini…tikach mimeni*”; in our *Selichot*, we modify this verse, changing it to a prayer on behalf of the entire nation – “*Al tashlikheinu…tikach mimenu*.”) The simple meaning of this prayer is that it is a plea for assistance during our condition of frailty in old age. When our physical strength declines, we are no longer capable of caring for ourselves, and we thus plead to God to assist us in our time of weakness and lend us the extra support we need. *Metzudat David* adds that David’s intent in this prayer is to prove to one and all that even during his younger, healthy years, it was God who brought him his success. If he would suffer depravation during old age, people would naturally assume that when he had his strength he was capable of great achievement, but now that his physical rigor declined, he is helpless. David wanted God to assist him in old age in order to demonstrate that throughout his life, even as he led successful battles and built an empire, it was God who made these accomplishments possible.

Rashi, however, offers a surprising – and powerful – explanation of this verse, writing, “If I have become old in sins – meaning, I have sinned abundantly.” According to Rashi, David here uses the condition of old age euphemistically, as a reference to sinfulness. The frailty of old age allegorically expresses the “frailty” of the sinner, and thus this prayer expresses our wish that God does not abandon us even if we are guilty of many offenses.

How might we understand this analogy between sinning “abundantly” and old age?

As several writers have explained, falling into a habitual routine of wrongful conduct leaves a person weak and helpless like a physically frail patient. Just as physical decline causes a person to lose his ability to care for himself, so does spiritual decline make it exceedingly difficult – albeit never impossible – for an individual to recover. Once sin has become entrenched in one’s pattern of conduct, that person becomes like a frail elderly person, with his capabilities compromised. We therefore beg the Almighty to stay at our side and help us when this happens, when we become spiritually frail, when we’ve hit rock bottom, or when we find ourselves struggling to change our habits. We turn to Him and ask that He assist us in our efforts to improve in spiritual “old age,” when sin has already become habitual and we feel incapable of breaking our bad habits. Rather than despair of ever changing our conduct, we recognize that we are capable of change and beg the Almighty to help us make it happen.

Thursday

In the introductory section of the *Selichot* service, we recite the verse from Tehillim (25:11), “For the sake of Your Name, O Lord, you shall forgive our iniquity, for it is great.” (The verse is written in the singular form – “*la-avoni*” – but in our *Selichot* prayer we change it to the plural form – “*la-avoneinu*.”) The final clause of this verse – “*ki rav hu*” (“for it is great”) – seems difficult, and has been interpreted in different ways by the various commentators. David here appears to be giving a reason for why God should forgive him, but the reason he gives – that his sinfulness is “great” – seems hardly a valid reason for why he should be granted atonement.

The simplest interpretation, perhaps, which is offered by both Ibn Ezra and *Metzudat David*, is that the word “*ki*” in this verse means not “because” (or “for”), as it normally does, but rather “even though.” Ibn Ezra cites a compelling prooftext from Sefer Shemot (34:9) when Moshe pleads with God after the sin of the golden calf to forgive the nation “*ki am keshei oref hu*” – literally, “because it is a stiff-necked people.” There, too, the verse is more easily understood if the word “*ki*” is read to mean “even though,” in which case Moshe asks God to pardon the people’s sin despite their sinfulness. Accordingly, here in Tehillim, too, it is likely that David asks God to forgive his iniquity even though “*rav hu*” – it is severe.

Another simple explanation is offered by Amos Chacham in his *Da’at Mikra* commentary, suggesting that “*ki*” in this verse means “which is.” In other words, David is simply asking God to forgive his iniquity “which is great.”

Rashi, however, explains differently, writing, “*Ki naeh la-rav li-slo’ach avon rav*” – “For it is fitting for He who is great to forgive a great iniquity.” This interpretation is taken from the Midrash (*Vayikra Rabba* 5:8), which comments (in reference to this verse and to a verse earlier in Tehillim – “*ve-nikeiti mi-pesha rav*,” 19:14), “David said before the Almighty: Master of the world! You are a great God, and I – my sins are great. It is fitting for a great God to forgive great sins!” When Davis cries, “For the sake of Your Name…you shall forgive my iniquity, for it is great,” he means that God should forgive him because God’s Name is great, because it is known that God is all-mighty and all-powerful.

*Chazal* here are teaching us that forgiveness is a sign of greatness, not weakness. One of the impediments to forgiving those who have wronged us is our inherently healthy sense of self-worth and self-importance, which leads us to think that we need to remain angry and resentful in order to protect our dignity. If we forgive those who have done us harm, we may intuitively feel, then we are somehow failing to uphold our stature. Since we see ourselves as important, we instinctively find it necessary to resent and perhaps even punish those who have infringed upon our honor and shown us disrespect and disregard. *Chazal* here teach us that the exact opposite is true, that forgiveness is actually a sign of greatness. It is especially those who consider themselves important that should not be terribly bothered by insults and other offenses, because they are beyond pettiness and trivialities. If we live with a healthy sense of self-worth, then we will be more immune to resentment, because we will realize that we and our lives are simply too important for us to bother settling the score with those who have wronged us. Just as God’s greatness makes it more likely for Him to forgive our wrongdoing, our self-esteem should lead us to be patient and forgiving, and to see petty resentment and hostility as beneath our stature and dignity, and simply not worth our time or our attention.

Friday

In the introduction to our *Selichot* prayers, we proclaim that we do not approach God “with kindness” or “with [good] deeds” (“*Lo be-chesed ve-lo be-rachamim*”), but rather we come before the Almighty like impoverished paupers knocking on somebody’s door – “*ke-dalim u-kh’rashim dafaknu delatekha*.” We then beg, “We have knocked on Your doors, O compassionate and gracious one, please do not send us away empty-handed.”

It has been suggested that this prayer, in which we liken ourselves to paupers begging for assistance, can be explained on the basis of the story told in Masekhet Bava Metzia (83a) of a group of poor laborers. Rabba Bar Bar Chana hired this group as movers, and during their work they broke a barrel of wine. In lieu of payment for the damage they caused, Rabba took their garments. In desperation, they approached Rav, who promptly instructed Rabba to return their garments, explaining that although Rabba did, strictly speaking, have the legal right to seize their property, nevertheless, the verse in Mishlei (2:20) admonishes us to follow the “*derekh tovim*” – the “way of the good.” The proper thing to do, Rav told Rabba, was to waive his right to the laborers’ property. Afterward, these workers explained to Rav that they were very poor and could hardly afford any food. Rav then instructed Rabba to pay their wages, despite the costly damage they caused him. Although they did not, from a strict legal standpoint, deserve their wages, as they did not perform their work properly, nevertheless, Rav cited the conclusion of the aforementioned verse in Mishlei which commands us to follow the “*orchot tzadikim*” – the “paths of the righteous.”

Similarly, we approach God as we begin our *Selichot* prayer and openly acknowledge that we do not deserve our “wages.” We have broken many barrels, as it were, failing to properly do the jobs assigned to us. Nevertheless, we ask God to fulfill our wishes because we are poor and helpless. We can achieve nothing on our own, without His blessings and assistance, and we rely solely on Him. Like the poor laborers in the Gemara’s story, who did not deserve their payment but were awarded it anyway, we appeal to God’s righteousness and compassion and beg for our “wages” even though we did not always do our work satisfactorily.

Developing this analogy further, we, like Rabba Bar Bar Chana’s laborers, try to do our job properly, but we are not always as careful and meticulous as we should be. We are flawed and imperfect, and sometimes we are lazy, distracted and lax, resulting in “broken barrels” over the course of our work to serve God. Like the movers, we work hard, invest a great deal of time and effort to do what God expects of us, but we are frequently negligent and make costly mistakes. We thus come before the Almighty without making excuses for our failings, but appealing to His boundless compassion, affirming that we are poor and helpless, and dependent entirely upon His grace.

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