

Shabbos Shuvah

# What Do We Mean by Teshuva

OCTOBER 1986  
Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

Why do so many Jews come to synagogue on Yom Kippur? Why does Yom Kippur draw us? We come to the synagogue because we all know that we have failed. We all know that we have not lived up to our potential. We all know that we could have done more. We all know that we could have been better people. We all know that we need to do Teshuva. Teshuva in Judaism does not just mean being sorry for the sins that we committed and resolving never to do them again. It also means being sorry for our not having lived up to our potential, for our not having replied to all the challenges around us, for our not having done everything we could have done to develop ourselves, to help others, and to make this a better world. Teshuva means that we recognize that we have failed, but that from now on we are going to try to do better. Each of us knows that we must do Teshuva. If we do not, then we know that it would be very hard to live with ourselves. Our failures would overwhelm us. That's why we come to the synagogue. We come to the synagogue to do Teshuva, but what precisely do we mean by doing Teshuva?

In the Haphtorah that we read on the Shabbos between Rosh Hashonna and Yom Kippur, which is called Shabbos Shuvo, we learn about Teshuva. This Haphtorah begins with the sentence, "Return, O Israel, unto the Lord, thy G-d, for thy hast stumbled in thy iniquity. Take with you words and return unto the Lord." The use of the word "stumble", the rabbis explain, typifies the way we sin. Most of us sin not because we want to do evil. We sin because we fall into it. We stumble into it. Nobody stumbles on purpose unless, of course, we are <sup>children</sup> a child who wants to get attention or an actor whose parts call for ~~him~~ <sup>us</sup> to stumble.

People stumble for basically three different reasons. We stumble first because we refuse to recognize reality. People refuse to recognize that things have changed. People are not sensitive to others around them, to the fact that children have grown up or institutions have changed, or that old methods will not work anymore, that things which were acceptable at one time are not acceptable now, i.e., my grandparents did not go to college. There are new challenges and temptations today and old methods of teaching eternal values will not work. We must use new methods.

The second type of person who stumbles is one who does not consciously set out to do anything wrong, but when it comes to making a choice in life, he inevitably makes the wrong choice. He really is a good person, but he cannot fact the consequences of his actions. He runs into some unexpected expenses and he just borrows a few dollars from the till. He fully intends to pay them back, but then other things come up and he ends up taking more. Or, <sup>all</sup> at he intended to do was to talk to that beautiful woman. How did he know that he would end up having an affair with her? He did not set out to do wrong, but he ends up doing wrong and hurting a lot of people.

Then there is a third type of person, the person who stumbles into evil because he does not know any better. He doesn't know that drugs are addictive. He doesn't know that if he runs around with certain types of people they will demand terrible things of him. He doesn't know that if he deals with a loan shark he is going to have to sell his wife's jewelry, etc. He doesn't know what he is doing, and,

OCTOBER 1986

Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

PAGE THREE

therefore, he falls into evil ways.

The rabbis tell us that to each of these cases we must do Teshuva. We must do Teshuva in such a way that we will not repeat, we will not fall into these same traps. The name Rosh Hashonna, itself, speaks about how we are to do Teshuva in these cases. The word "Shonna" in Hebrew has three meanings. It can mean "to repeat" or "to change" or "to learn". To each of these people the message of Rosh Hashonna is clear. To the person who cannot change, whose ideas are frozen, and we are not, of course, here talking about Jewish beliefs or practices but implementing these beliefs and practices, Rosh Hashonna speaks and says, "Change. Don't stay frozen. Don't treat your 30 year old son as if he is 3 years old." Don't feel that in the America of the 80's, with all its drug problems, confusion of sex roles, etc., that our synagogues should stress the same things as in the 1960's. Remember, things change, and we have to change with them.

To the second person Rosh Hashonna says, "Repeat". Remember, the moral values are the same. They cannot be bent. You cannot claim, "Well, I'll just embezzle a little money from the company, but I will pay it back." You cannot take moral shortcuts. You must always realize that right is right and wrong is wrong, and when you cross that line you are in for trouble. You may be a basically good person who just wants to take a little shortcut, but you are in for a lot of trouble if you do.

Finally, Shonna means to learn. Those people who get in trouble because they do not know, because they do not realize what they are

OCTOBER 1986

Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

PAGE FOUR

doing (I'll just try cocaine once. I'll just be involved with these people for a little time.) must learn. The basis of Teshuva in Judaism is to know when to repeat, when to change, and when to learn. Basic moral values never change. It is only the means to implement them that changes, and we must always continuously learn and study if we are to avoid the pitfalls of life.

That's, too, one of the reasons why we blow the shofar on Rosh Hashonna, a natural always available instrument. The shofar is a symbol of the unchanging eternal values in the world which always must be heeded. When the Temple stood we used to blow on Rosh Hashonna not only a shofar but also a trumpet. The trumpet was the symbol of change. The shofar was the same shofar we used every year but the trumpet had to be a new one every time there was a leadership change. The trumpet Moshe used could not be used by Joshua, and the trumpet Joshua used could not be used by the elders, etc. The shofar stands for the Torah, the eternal values of our people. The trumpet stood for how we would implement the Torah, that depends on each generation. Every leader had to have his own trumpet. Eternal values do not change but how we implement them <sup>do</sup> ~~does~~. Even the sounds of the shofar emphasizes the different ways we must <sup>do</sup> Teshuva. Sometimes we must be constant, not change eternal values, other times we must change, and always we must study and learn. We repeat the Tekiah twice, in the beginning and end, to teach us that the values of Judaism remain constant. The Teruah, which stands for protesting against injustices, teaches us that we have to work to change things, to make sure that the values of the Torah are implemented more fully

OCTOBER 1986

Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

PAGE FIVE

in life, even if that means changing what previous generations did. The Shvorum, which stands for solutions, teaches us that unless we study, unless we constantly educate and analyze our problems we will stumble into evil. The notes of the shofar then teach us that in order to do Teshuva we must sometimes be constant, sometimes change, but always we must learn.

Even when we do Teshuva, the rabbis tell us that there are two types of Teshuva we can do. There is a "Teshuva Meyeero - a Teshuva from fear" and a "Teshuva MeAhava - a Teshuva from love". Teshuva from fear is a Teshuva which a person does because he is afraid of external forces. He feels that it was external forces which caused him to sin, and it is only external pressures which will assure that he will stay on the right path. These people, when they do Teshuva, feel that they must break completely with their past. They feel that unless they break with friends and family they will revert to old ways. They feel they need a new environment. They feel that their Teshuva can only be sustained if they break completely with all their friends. This, the rabbis tell us, is a type of Teshuva, but a lower form of Teshuva. It is Teshuva Meyeero, a Teshuva from fear. There is a higher form of Teshuva, Teshuva MeAhava, a Teshuva from love, where a person does not radically break from the past but uses the skills and experiences of <sup>his</sup> the past to do good. He does not break with his family and friends radically. His inner convictions are so strong that he knows that outside forces cannot touch them. He now, of course, <sup>is</sup> ~~is~~ leading a different lifestyle. He now tries to meet all the challenges of life. He tries to live by the highest ethical principles ~~he~~ keeps kosher, Shabbos, learns Torah, etc<sup>3</sup>

which he does not compromise, but he does not fear contact with people with whom he associated before.

In the Gemora Yoma we learn how the great Rabbi Resh Lokish said what, at first glance, seems to be two contradictory things. He said, "Great is Teshuva because it changes our willful sins into accidental sin", and later on he said, "Great is Teshuva because it changes our willful sins into merits". How can Resh Lokish say both these things? Either our Teshuva changes our willful sins into accidental sins or it changes them into merits. How can it do both those things? The rabbis answer that it depends upon what kind of Teshuva we do. If we do Teshuva Meyero, Teshuva from fear, then our sins only become accidental sins. We were in the wrong environment when we did them. We had the wrong friends and influences upon us so, therefore, they were accidental. If, however, we change our environment, if we change our friends, if we shun our past, then we will be able to do the right thing. On the other hand, though, if we do Teshuva MeAhava, a Teshuva which comes from a deep inner conviction, then our willful sins change into merits. How does this happen? It happens because now we are able to take the enthusiasm and verve and skills which we obtained when we did <sup>evil</sup> ~~sins~~ and impress them into the service of doing good. We do not have to shun our past or our friends. We can now use our past to do good ~~when we want~~. What we need to do is to use the same passion that we before used for evil and use it, instead, for good. G-d does not want us to forsake our past. He would rather have us use our past in order to rise to higher heights.

On Yom Kippur we come to the synagogue to ask for forgiveness, to ask for Teshuva. We cannot really ask for Teshuva. It is up to us to do Teshuva. We gain forgiveness when we are willing to face the fact that we have stumbled in the past and that we can overcome this stumbling, no matter its cause, if we will but reply to all the moral and religious challenges that face us now. If need be, we may have to forsake our past, but the highest form of Teshuva is to use our past and make it serve us by giving us the passion, skill, and family support to reach even higher heights in doing good. We all need to reply to the challenges at hand. Let us all hope and pray that in the coming year we will rise to every occasion and, thus, fulfill our potential, and, therefore, be worthy of being blessed with a year of Health, Happiness, Prosperity, and Self-fulfillment. On behalf of my wife, my family, and the congregation, I wish you all a Gemar Chaseema Tova.