



GEULAS YISRAEL

RABBI MOSHE TARAGIN

RAM YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

MAGGID SHIUR ALL PARSHA AND ALL DAF, OU.ORG

YOM KIPPUR

Yom Kippur: White as Snow, Clean as Wool

Teshuvah is a complex, multi-layered process. For this reason, the Nevi'im offer a rich array of metaphors to illuminate it. Teshuvah is likened to medical healing, to purifying waters, to a journey back home, and to the re-fertilization of dried and desiccated land. Each metaphor reveals a distinct aspect of the path of return, highlighting the many dimensions of teshuvah.

Yeshayahu, however, speaks of teshuvah in colors. To him, red represents the vivid color of sin, associated with stain. Sin leaves its mark upon the human soul. For Yeshayahu, teshuvah consists of removing that red stain and restoring the whiteness of our relationship with Hashem.

אִם־יְהִי חַטּוֹתֵיכֶם כְּשָׁנִים כְּשֶׁלֶג יִלְבִּינּוּ, אִם־יֵאָדְמוּ
כִּתּוּלֵעַ כְּצֶמֶר יִהְיֶה

“Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.”

DOUBLE WHITE

When Yeshayahu portrays teshuvah through the image of whitening, he presents a double vision: sin is rendered white like snow, and it is whitened like freshly laundered wool. Why summon both metaphors? What distinguishes the natural brilliance of snow from the purified whiteness of cleansed

garments? What separate dimensions of teshuvah are embodied in each image?

SCRUBBING THE SOUL

By portraying teshuvah as laundering clothing, Yeshayahu highlights the human effort and hard work that teshuvah demands. Snow falls gracefully from the heavens, blanketing the earth in white without human involvement. Authentic teshuvah, though, ranks among the most emotionally demanding of all religious experiences.

The image of laundering captures the multi-staged, difficult process of teshuvah. When laundering, first, we must detect where the wool is stained; blemishes and stains are often subtle and hidden. Only then can the labor of cleansing begin, scrubbing to restore the cleanliness of the fabric.

Teshuvah is also multi-staged. First, we must locate our sins. This requires breaking down the false narratives we tell ourselves to soften the truth, confronting our inner selves in their raw and unadorned state. We must shatter the funhouse mirrors that reflect the image we wish to project, rather than the person we truly are.

After we identify our flaws, we must summon the courage to confront them fully. True change demands facing the darker parts of

ourselves and requires faith—the faith that we are not beyond repair, the faith that renewal remains within reach.

At this stage, the work of teshuvah begins: the patient labor of embedding transformation and safeguarding ourselves from slipping back into old, familiar patterns. By casting teshuvah in the language of laundering, Yeshayahu underscores how demanding the journey of repentance can be. It is not a passive snowfall that whitens effortlessly from above, but a human struggle—deliberate, and fraught with both pain and possibility.

CLEANSING OVER TIME

Beyond the effort required in a single act of teshuvah, Yeshayahu also draws our attention to its cumulative effect over time. Snow may fall in abundance, but it quickly melts and disappears, leaving little trace behind. A later snowfall bears no connection to the first; each arrives and departs independently, without shaping or easing the next.

Laundering, however, works differently. We wash our garments not merely to cleanse them in the moment, but also to protect the fabric from lasting damage. Left untreated, stains would sink too deeply to be removed. By laundering consistently, we prevent such buildup, making each subsequent cleaning easier and more effective.

So too with teshuvah: though we may become stained by sin again in the future, the work of repentance we undertake today lays the groundwork for tomorrow.

Sadly, many of the changes we pledge to make fade with time. We slip back into old habits, and our lofty commitments often go unmet. This can weigh heavily—are we not deceiving ourselves, promising resolutions we suspect we will break?

One way to understand this struggle is through Yeshayahu's metaphor of laundering. A garment may become soiled again, yet it is easier to wash the second time because it has already been cleansed once before. Each act of teshuvah lays the groundwork for deeper, more lasting transformation. Even if we return to the same sins we confronted in a previous year, the earlier effort leaves its mark. By having identified our flaws and begun the demanding work of self-confrontation, the path of future teshuvah becomes smoother and more attainable.

Thus, the metaphor of laundering captures not only the effort and care required in teshuvah but also its enduring, lifelong nature. Each act of repentance is both a confrontation with the present and an investment in the future, preparing the soul for deeper renewal and making the path of ongoing transformation more attainable with each successive effort.

TESHUVAH IN TURMOIL

Snow generally falls as part of irregular weather patterns, while laundering is a routine act, carried out under ordinary conditions. Teshuvah, too, should not be confined to the intensity of Elul or the religious fervor of Yom Kippur. Rather, it must be practiced regularly and at frequent intervals, becoming an ongoing rhythm in our spiritual lives.

Yet teshuvah must also be stormy and intense—especially during Elul and Tishrei. Snow falls in storms and irregular weather, when the air is cold and gusts disrupt daily life. Snowy teshuvah is neither routine nor clinical, but raw and unsettling. It is a dark descent into the night of the soul, a demanding journey into the hidden chambers of our identity, where we confront pain, sadness,

and regret. It is a mourning for lost potential, often irretrievable.

By evoking snow, Yeshayahu warns us not to domesticate teshuvah, or reduce it to a calm, polite assessment of strengths and weaknesses, followed by neatly written pledges for the future. Teshuvah must rage. It must be stormy, unsettling, and raw. Only then does it have the power to shatter illusions and remake the self.

TESHUVAH FROM ABOVE

Yet teshuvah is not only our stormy labor; there is also a dimension beyond human effort, a help that descends from above. Laundering is entirely a human endeavor, demanding effort, patience, and skill. Snow, by contrast, descends without human involvement, blanketing the world in a soft, celestial sheen.

By comparing teshuvah to snow, Yeshayahu reminds us that cleansing our sins is not achieved by human strength alone. We must turn our eyes upward, seeking *siyata d'shmaya* for teshuvah.

We often imagine teshuvah as an entirely human endeavor, the work of the heart and the exercise of free will. Hashem granted us autonomy, leaving our choices to us alone. Within this framework, teshuvah appears to be a solitary journey: if, by our own strength, we repent and repair, we draw ourselves back into His presence. Teshuvah is our

bridge back to Hashem, and we must build it alone. Yet Yeshayahu insists that Hashem is part of the teshuvah process, just as snow descends from above.

The Torah commands us: ומלתם את ערלתם לבבכם (“circumcise the foreskin of your heart,” Devarim 10:16), generally understood as softening stubbornness, breaking through obstinacy, and becoming more open to faith and spirituality. This is one of the gateways to authentic teshuvah.

And yet, in Parashat Nitzavim, Moshe assures us: ומל ה' אלקיך את לבבך ואת לבב זרעך (“the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your children,” Devarim 30:6).

Although the work of the heart seems to belong exclusively to human volition, we are invited to allow God into that inner chamber, to let Him participate in our teshuvah. We must ask God to grant us clarity to identify the flaws we so stubbornly conceal, honesty to face ourselves without illusion, and courage to pursue real transformation rather than cosmetic adjustments.

By asking Hashem to “rain down the snow of teshuvah,” we ask Him to assist the renewal or the whitening we cannot achieve on our own.

COVERING OUR DARKNESS

Finally, the image of snow reminds us that at times there is an option other than full teshuvah. Sometimes we cannot perform the teshuvah we long for. Sometimes we fear our sins are too severe to be atoned for. In those moments, we turn to the image of snow.

Laundering actually removes stains and whitens soiled wool, restoring what was sullied. Snow, however, does not alter the colors beneath it. It simply blankets the earth with

In memory of my beloved father

**Mordechai ben
Yehoshua Zvi z"l**

on his 61st Yartzheit, 11 Tishrei

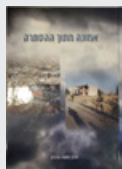
Miriam Marcus

a pure white veil, concealing the green, the brown, or the gray below.

When we feel we have reached the limits of our capacity for teshuvah, we turn to Hashem and pray: even if You do not erase our sins, cover them. Cover them with the snow of Your love. For love itself has the power to overlook: ועל כל פשעים תכסה אהבה ("Love covers all transgressions," Mishlei 10:12). With that love, You can look beyond our failings, cloak our darkness in whiteness, and shield our brokenness with compassion.

This year, more than ever, we plead with Hashem to cover our darkness with His love. We bear countless reasons to merit that love. For two years, we have endured trials; for two years, we have carried pain; for two years, we have stoutly defended our Land—His Land—the nation He entrusted to us. Through it all, we have shown our profound love for Him and for His historic mission. Let that love now descend upon us, shielding our flaws.

May His love cover our transgressions. May He rain down snow upon us and make us pure. ■



OU Press is honored to partner with Rabbi Moshe Taragin on his new volume in Hebrew regarding the recent war ('Emunah B'toch Hahastara). This remarkable book is also available in English, "Dark Clouds Above, Faith Below"

Correction: In my article about Rosh Hashanah entitled Rosh Hashanah: Malchut Revealed, I mistakenly wrote that the Rosh Chodesh korbanot are not offered on Rosh Hashanah. In fact, they are offered. What is absent is their explicit mention in the Mussaf tefillah. In the beracha of U'mipnei Chata'einu we recall only the korbanot of Rosh Hashanah—V'et Musfei Yom Hazikaron—without reference to Musfei Rosh Chodesh.

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