

**BADERECH****RABBI JUDAH MISCHEL**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CAMP HASCH
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How Great We Can Be

Gilad grew up in a warm, Torah home in Bnei Brak but drifted from observance as he got older. He left behind the familiarity of ritual and mitzvos, left behind his family, and moved in with a non-observant relative. Gilad continued to distance himself from tradition, his life spiraling further from his upbringing, until he became engaged to a non-Jewish woman.

Even the non-observant relative was shaken. While unable to dissuade Gilad from the engagement, he did convince him to go home for one Shabbos to speak openly and honestly with his parents. Gilad agreed on the condition that the visit would be on his terms; for instance, he would smoke on Shabbos, openly, in front of his family. He wanted them to see him for who ‘he really was’. With broken hearts, his parents agreed to the meeting, since more than anything they wanted their son to know: ‘You are always ours, and this is always your home; you are always welcome.’

Each Shabbos afternoon, Gilad’s father would go to a shiur given by Rav Aharon Leib Shteinman. On the Shabbos of Gilad’s visit, as his father was heading out the door, he casually and without any expectation invited Gilad to join him. He was shocked when his son agreed, put on a *kippah* and headed out the

door together with him. After the shiur, they both approached the Rosh Yeshivah. With pain in his voice, the father confided, “My son is not shomer Shabbos; he is far from the Yidishkeit of his youth.”

Rav Shteinman turned to Gilad. “How long have you not kept Shabbos?”

“Two years,” Gilad answered flatly.

“And in that time, did you ever have a *hirschur teshuvah*, a passing thought of return to Yidishkeit?” “Yes,” Gilad said after a pause. “Maybe something like four times.”

“Four times? And how long did each thought of change last?”

“About ten minutes.”

Reb Aharon Leib’s face lit up, and excitedly exclaimed, “So for forty minutes over the past two years, you had the status of *מקום שבעלי אינם עומדים* – *צדיקים גמורים אינם עומדים* ‘In a place where those who repent stand perfectly righteous people cannot stand!’ (Berachos 34b). You are counted among the *baalei teshuvah*, a place so high that even perfect *tzaddikim* cannot stand there. For that, I am jealous of you! *Gut Shabbos*.”

The words struck deep. Gilad left the shiur, but Rav Shteinman’s blessing did not leave him. After much introspection and inner struggle, he broke off his engagement and began to turn his life around.

Later, when asked what moved him to accept his father’s invitation that Shabbos, Gilad shared a memory. Back in fourth grade, his class in *cheder* had gone for a *farher*, to take a test with Rav Aharon Leib. At the

rebbe's request, the Rosh Yeshiva asked very simple questions. When it was Gilad's turn, he couldn't answer. Rav Aharon Leib asked an easier question. Again, Gilad didn't know. A third, even easier — still, no response was forthcoming.

When the *farher* was through, each boy lined up to receive a candy from the Rosh Yeshiva. As Gilad approached, Rav Shteinman paused. With his typical warmth, he told the young boy:

“In Yiddishkeit, we reward effort, not results. The other boys exerted effort to answer one question, so I gave them each one candy. You worked hard on three questions - so you deserve three candies.” With a smile, Rav Shteinman handed him three treats.

“The kindness, sensitivity and encouragement of the Rosh Yeshiva that day never left me. That's why I agreed to meet him again. And at my lowest point, he showed me that Hashem cherishes any small step that I can manage at that moment. That's when I knew I could come back.”

ועיקר התשובה הוא בהרהור הלב בלבד, שהרי נקרא בכך צדיק גמור אפילו היה מקודם רשע גמור

“The main aspect of *teshuvah* is the thought in the heart. Through it, a person is now called a complete *tzadik*, even if he was previously a complete *rasha*.” (Rebbe Tzadok haKohen of Lublin, *Takanas haShavin*)

We never know when we will experience a transformative thought, interaction or desire for goodness: “Through *hirschurei teshuvah*, we hear Hashem calling out to us. From the Torah, from the feelings in one's heart, and from the entire world and all that it contains. חשק הטוב, the desire for goodness grows steadily within him, and his very flesh that caused him to sin

in the first place, becomes more refined, until אור התשובה, the light of *teshuvah* penetrates.” (Rav Kook, *Oros haTeshuvah*, 22)

Hirschurei teshuvah can arrive in infinite modalities. Hopefully they come in the form of sweet and wonderful moments: when we meet up with a good friend and catch a glimpse of our highest selves, when we look at our children and remember how great we can be, when we hear a certain story or *nigun* and recognize how deeply we desire to be close to Hashem, when we are inspired by someone and we yearn to make a difference in the world and live on a higher level. The emotional heights of our birthday or anniversary, the spirit of a Yom Tov, an uplifting *shi'ur* or inspiring meeting with a *tzadik* can trigger a cascade of joy and insight into our life — all can produce a pure *hirschur* of *teshuvah*.

The truth be told, I don't love (or honestly even relate to) ‘religious’ vs. ‘*baal teshuva*’ stories which have a predictable ‘happy ending’, perfectly wrapped with a bow at the end. An authentic life is lived *baderech*, as a continuous process, a journey through the ups and downs and ebb and flow of *avodas Hashem* - irrespective of a ‘bottom line outcome’.

Yom Kippur presents a renewed opportunity for us to appreciate how meaningful our efforts and intentions are to Hashem. May we be blessed to embrace our holy thoughts and intentions when they arrive, and enjoy the sweetness of these great days! ■

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