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Torah & Psychology: Accepting Where We Are, Becoming Who We Can Be

WELCOME TO TORAH & PSYCHOLOGY

We're excited to invite you into a new series exploring one of the most important journeys we can undertake: understanding ourselves.

We spend our lives trying to understand people – why we think the way we do, why we react the way we do, and why changing even the things we know we should change can be so difficult. Understanding ourselves is more than an interesting pastime, it is essential to our growth, our avodat Hashem, and becoming the best versions of ourselves that Hashem created us to be.

The Torah has a remarkable amount to say about the complexities of human nature. Psychology can help us notice and understand some of those same dynamics in new ways. In this series, we'll begin with Torah sources and ideas, and draw on psychological concepts to help us explore them more deeply and

translate them into a greater understanding of ourselves and our avodat Hashem.

Our hope is to explore questions that are not merely intellectually thought-provoking, but personally consequential—questions that can help us better understand ourselves, confront our challenges, and ultimately become better people. Our first article takes up one of the most fundamental challenges in that process: seeing ourselves clearly.

As we journey through Elul, we are called upon to examine our lives and embark on the process of teshuva. Yet, how can we honestly judge ourselves, when we are the ones doing the judging?

TOO CLOSE TO THE CASE

Elul asks us to do something that sounds simple but in reality can be extraordinarily difficult – judge ourselves honestly.

Hashem asks us to look back at our year, identify where we fell short, recognize our mistakes, and take responsibility for them. But can we really be objective when we are both the person being judged and the person doing the judging?

At first glance, Chazal (Mishna Negaim 2:5) seem to suggest that we cannot:

“כָּל הַנִּגְעִים אֲדָם רֹאֶה, חוּץ מִנִּגְעֵי עַצְמוֹ”

“A person can see everyone else's afflictions

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aside from his own.”

On a simple level, the Mishna is teaching us that a Kohen is not permitted to evaluate his own “נגע” or “affliction” to determine whether it will be considered ארעת and correspondingly whether he will become impure. On a deeper level, Chazal explain that while one can easily identify “afflictions” or flaws in others, one is incapable of properly evaluating his own imperfections.

This begs the question, if so, how can Hashem expect us to properly identify our own flaws in the month of Elul? How can Hashem ask us to do what seems to be impossible?

More specifically, there are two primary challenges that the Gemara presents back to back regarding the issue of self-judgment.

Firstly, the Gemara (Sanhedrin 9b) establishes: אין אדם משים עצמו רשע — A person cannot legally render himself wicked by his own admission. This means that while we may believe a person's account of what happened, he cannot legally establish himself as a רשע through his own testimony and as a result he is unable to receive any form of punishment. Rav Elchanan Wasserman (Kobetz Ha'erot 22:1) explains that the reason a court cannot possibly believe this individual to incriminate himself is because, in the process, he labels himself as a רשע who is thereby disqualified from testimony. This Halacha is codified in the Shulchan Aruch (Choshen Mishpat 34:24).

Secondly, אדם קרוב אצל עצמו, a person is inherently “close to himself.” This means that just as one cannot testify about his relatives or family members, so too, he is not believed to testify about himself.

Similarly, the Gemara teaches us אין אדם

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א - רואה חובה לעצמו - a person cannot see his own liability or guilt (Shabbat 119a and Ketubot 105b). Rashi explains: אין דעתו מתקרב לצד אמת - the honest mind simply cannot bring itself to find himself guilty, even when his intention is to judge truthfully. In the courtroom of self-evaluation, we are almost always our own most brilliant defense attorneys.

The problem isn't necessarily dishonesty. I may sincerely believe my own explanation. But when the case is about me, it is difficult to see the argument against me with the same clarity that I would see it in someone else.

Yet, this leaves us with a dilemma regarding the teshuva process: If the Torah does not permit me to self-incriminate AND if I am considered “close” to myself and therefore biased, how can Hashem expect me to objectively and accurately acknowledge my own shortcomings?

TESHUVAH CHANGES THE EQUATION

Tosafot (Baba Metzia 3b) ask this exact question in a different context regarding witnesses obligating one to bring a קרבן חטאת after committing a sin:

וְהֵיכָן נֵאָמַר לומר מִיָּד הֵיכָן, הֵא אֵין אָדָם מְשִׁים
עַצְמוֹ רָשָׁע

The Torah only permits us to bring a קרבן

if the sin that one committed was committed by mistake. The Gemara there states that if witnesses come into court and testify that an individual sinned they are not able to force him to offer a קרבן because even if they could successfully testify that he committed a sin, they would not be able to prevent him from making a counter claim that he sinned on purpose. Tosafot ask, how could we believe him when he claims that he sinned purposefully, after all אדם משימ עצמו רשע one is not permitted to self-incriminate?!

Tosafot provide a beautiful answer that helps us address our first difficulty with the teshuva process: וְיֵשׁ לוֹמַר דְּאִין נֶאֱמַן לְפָסֵל עֲצָמוֹ, while he is not believed to disqualify himself, here, he is doing teshuva.

In other words, when I confess before Hashem, I am not engaged in an act of self-incrimination, rather, I am acknowledging: “I did something wrong, yet I want to change.” Teshuva turns confession from self-condemnation into self-correction.

DON'T BECOME A RASHA IN YOUR OWN EYES

On a broader level, perhaps this is what we are taught in Pirkei Avot (2:13) וְאַל תְּהִי רָשָׁע בְּפָנֶיךָ. “Do not be evil before yourself.” Rabbeinu Yonah explains: יְהִי רָשָׁע בְּעֵינֵי עֲצָמוֹ, שְׂאִינוֹ יָכוֹל לְחַזֹּר בַּתְּשׁוּבָה... נִמְצָא זֶה מִתְּנִיָּאשׁ לְבֹו מֵן הַתְּשׁוּבָה. If a person sees himself as inherently wicked, he may conclude that he cannot change. He becomes discouraged and eventually gives up on the possibility of achieving teshuva.

Instead, Rabbeinu Yonah reminds us to see ourselves as balanced between guilt and merit: מִחֻצָּה חֵיב וּמִחֻצָּה זָכַאי. One mitzvah can tip the scale and, just as easily, so can one aveira. We have tremendous potential to make all the

difference with every action we take. Teshuva requires brutal honesty about our actions, but tremendous care about what we conclude about ourselves. While the actions I committed may have been wrong, I cannot let them define me.

Sometimes two items that seem to contradict can both be true, and real growth requires us to hold on to both. I can honestly acknowledge that I need to change my actions, while also accepting myself as I am right now. I can take responsibility for what I have done without believing that my mistakes define me.

In Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), we call this tension, this way of holding two opposite truths at the same time, a dialectic. One of DBT’s central principles is the balance between acceptance and change: I can acknowledge reality exactly as it is, while still working to make things different. Without acceptance, we risk judging ourselves, seeing ourselves as bad and incapable of being different, and giving up on our ability to transform. Without change, we can remain stuck in unhelpful patterns and struggle to shift from where we are to where we want to be. This is the balance Rabbeinu Yonah is asking us to maintain. Teshuva requires us to accept the truth about our actions, acknowledging our mistakes, while simultaneously holding on to the belief that we can change.

THE SHEM MISHMUEL:

DIVINELY ASSISTED OBJECTIVITY

While Tosafot’s explanation and Rabbeinu Yonah’s reminder help us resolve the issue of self incrimination, the question remains since we are inherently biased towards ourselves, how can we possibly act as an objective judge over our own lives?

The Shem MiShmuel (Mishpatim 5:17) explains that Hashem gave a special gift to

B'nei Yisrael: מתנה טובה מהש"י לעמו ישראל שנתן להם כח ועוז להפשיט עצמם מכל מיני נגיעה ולהיות על עצמו כמו דיין הצופה מרחוק על כל הנעשה כאלו – a wonderful gift from Hashem... He gave them the strength and courage to strip away all personal bias and view themselves like a judge looking from afar at everything that occurred, as if the matter did not affect them at all. Through davening and introspection in Elul, Hashem grants us the ability to tap into this divine "courage" (oz) to look at our lives objectively.

This dialectic of acceptance and change offers an interesting perspective on what this might look like in practice. To see ourselves as the Shem MiShmuel describes, we accept ourselves by stepping away from our interpretations and reactions and looking at ourselves with the same openness as we look at someone else. We can notice what happened, what we did, without allowing it to define ourselves. This is not approval of what happened, rather the courage to see reality as it is, clearly, without judgment.

THE ELUL CHALLENGE

Perhaps this is the greatest "gift" of Elul: the ability to hold these two truths at once. We can look honestly at ourselves as we are, without resigning ourselves to remain that way.

And when we are finally able to look at ourselves honestly, without excuses and without despair, we discover the extraordinary gift of teshuva: the ability to understand and accept where we are while still believing in our ability to grow into the people Hashem created us to be. ■

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