

# 10 Lessons for 10 Days of Teshuba

*A High Holidays Companion*

Rabbi Yosef Bitton – Tishre 5781 | September 2020



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## The Rosh haShana Seder

*Day 1: September 19<sup>th</sup> / 1<sup>st</sup> of Tishre (Rosh haShana)*

During the two nights of Rosh haShana, we celebrate a 'Seder', a ceremonial pre-meal. Unlike the Pesah Seder, which involves the performance of several Mitzvot or commandments, the Rosh haShana Seder is basically a Minhag, a tradition.

The purpose of this Seder is to wish each other and all the members of the Jewish people, a happy, peaceful and prosperous new year.

The main blessing we wish for is peace. That is why the request of please God 'save us' and 'protect us from our enemies' is said once and again.

Following an ancient custom, we associate the names of the foods or fruits we eat with a key Hebrew word which alludes to each blessing. For example, when we eat "dates" (in Hebrew *temarim*) we ask Hashem to make all our enemies disappear (in Hebrew *itamu*), as

you can see, the Hebrew words for "dates" and "disappear" share a similar root T / M, and so on.

We also wish each other to have a year of blessings; to have as many merits as the pomegranate's seeds; to multiply like fish; and to experience a year of goodness and sweetness, like the apple with honey.

The wording of one of the blessings, the main one, comes directly from the Tora (parashat ki tabo): "*shenihyie lerosh velo lezanav*," "May HaShem help us to be at the head (top of our potential as individuals and as a nation) and not at the tail (bottom)."

Similar to Pesah, this Seder takes place after the Kiddush and before the formal meal. Some families have this Seder before hamotzi, and some families after hamotzi. Both traditions are acceptable.

SHANA TOBA!

## The Seder

*\*If/when this Seder is done after haMotzi, we do not say the Berakhot, we only say Yehi Ratzon*

### 1. תפוח בדבש - Apple and Honey

We take a piece of apple, we dip it in honey and we say:

יְהִי רְצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, שְׁתַּחַדְשׁ  
עֲלֵינוּ שָׁנָה טוֹבָה וּמְתוּקָה מִרְאשִׁית הַשָּׁנָה וְעַד אַחֲרֵית  
שָׁנָה

*May it be Your will, HASHEM, our G-d and G-d of our forefathers, that You renew for us a good and **sweet** year, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year.*

Before eating the apple we say:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הָעֵץ

*Blessed are You, HASHEM, our G-d, King of the universe, Creator of the fruit of the tree.*

### 2. כרתי - Leek

We take a piece of leek and say:

יְהִי רְצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, שְׂיִכְרְתוּ  
אוֹיְבֵינוּ וְשׂוֹנְאֵינוּ וְכָל מְבַקְשֵׁי רַעְתָּנוּ

*May it be Your will, HASHEM, our G-d and G-d of our forefathers, that Your enemies and foes and all those who wish us harm be **destroyed**.*

Before eating the leek, we say:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הָאֲדָמָה

*Blessed are You, HASHEM, our G-d, King of the universe, Creator of the fruit of the land.*

### 3. סלקא - Beets

יְהִי רְצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, שְׂיִסְתַּלְקוּ  
אוֹיְבֵינוּ וְשׂוֹנְאֵינוּ וְכָל מְבַקְשֵׁי רַעְתָּנוּ

*May it be Your will, HASHEM, our G-d and the G-d of our forefathers, that Your enemies and foes and all those who wish us harm be **removed**.*

### 4. תמר - Dates

יְהִי רְצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, שְׂיִתְמוּ  
אוֹיְבֵינוּ וְשׂוֹנְאֵינוּ וְכָל מְבַקְשֵׁי רַעְתָּנוּ

*May it be Your will, HASHEM, our G-d and G-d of our forefathers, that Your enemies and foes and all those who wish us harm be **ended**.*

### 5. קרא - Gourd

יְהִי רְצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, שְׂתִקְרַע  
רוּעַ גְּזֵר דִּינֵנוּ, וְיִקְרָאוּ לְפָנֶיךָ זְכוֹתֵינוּ

*May it be Your will, HASHEM, our G-d and G-d of our forefathers, that the decree of our bad sentence be **torn apart**, and may our merits be **proclaimed** before You*

### 6. רוביא - Beans

יְהִי רְצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, שְׂיִרְבּוּ  
זְכוֹתֵינוּ וְתִלְבַּבְנוּ

*May it be Your will, Lord our G-d and the G-d of our fathers, that our merits shall **increase** and that You **hearten** us.*

### 7. ראש כבש - Head of Sheep

יְהִי רְצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, שְׂנַהֲיָה  
לְרֹאשׁ וְלֹא לְזָנָב

*May it be Your will, HASHEM, our G-d and G-d of our forefathers, that we be as the **head** and not as the tail.*

### 8. רימון - Pomegranate

יְהִי רְצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, שְׂנַהֲיָה  
מִלְּאִים מִצּוֹת כְּרִמּוֹן

*May it be Your will, HASHEM, our G-d and G-d of our forefathers, that we be full of Mitzvoth (performing Your commandments) as (the seeds of) a **pomegranate**.*

## The Judge, the Sheep, and the Shofar

*Day 2: September 20<sup>th</sup> / 2<sup>nd</sup> of Tishre*

Rosh haShana is the beginning of the new Jewish year. Starting a new year is, of course, a reason for celebration and happiness. But for the Jewish people a new year is also a serious event. To the point that the Sages spoke more, much more, about the serious aspects of Rosh haShana than the celebratory aspects of Rosh haShana.

### **THE JUDGE**

The rabbis of the Mishna explained that Rosh haShana is nothing less than the day of judgment (יום הדין). What judgment? The most meaningful one. Assessing if you are doing with your life what you are supposed to do. And guess who is judging you? God - and yourself.

The trial begins on the first morning of Rosh haShana, the 1st of Tishri. When we enter the synagogue on that day, we should visualize that we are entering a courtroom. Our first challenge is to identify the Judge. He is there, but cannot be “seen” in a normal way. To “see” the Judge, to feel His presence, we use the help of our prayers. When correctly understood, the prayers should open our eyes. The prayers of Rosh haShana introduce God as the King. Judging his subjects was one of the main roles of the Kings of Israel (think, for example, of King Solomon’s judgment). The King was the Highest, and final, Judicial instance.

Therefore, during Rosh haShana – until the end of Yom Kippur – we repeatedly refer to God in our prayers using a keyword: “MELEKH”, which in Hebrew means “King” (or MALKENU, our King). “King” in the context of Rosh haShana means “Judge”.

### **THE SHEEP**

There is a very beautiful metaphor that our Rabbis mentioned in the Mishna to illustrate this profound idea. They say that on Rosh haShana “All human beings walk before the Almighty as sheep [in front of the shepherd].”

Once a year the shepherd gathers all his animals in a barn to carefully examine each of them. An expert shepherd needs just a few seconds to evaluate each animal. First, he takes a look at the animal and then examines the quality of the animal’s wool and the body of the sheep. After this short inspection, the shepherd takes his brush and marks each sheep with a different color.

If the wool of the sheep is of good quality, the shepherd will mark the back of the sheep with, say, a yellow color. Which means that this sheep will be kept for shearing. A sheep that is healthy and strong will be marked with blue paint, which means that this sheep will be destined for reproduction. Now, if the wool is not of a good quality and the sheep is not a good condition for reproduction the shepherd will paint the sheep with a red mark, which indicates that this sheep will be slaughtered for food. In a few seconds the shepherd determines the destiny of each animal for the next cycle.

Our Rabbis used this beautiful illustration to explain how we humans are judged by HaShem, our Shepherd, on Rosh HaShana. The Almighty looks carefully at each one of us. HaShem observes what we have done and have not done during the previous year. He sees if we have grown, learned and improved, or if we have wasted our time. Then, He determines our destiny, marking us for success, good health and life or, Has veShalom, for none of that.

Based on this, one can ask two very important questions:

1. How do we know what the color of the mark is that we carry on our backs after Rosh haShana? Same as the sheep, who walk around the barn without knowing what color they have been marked with, a human being cannot know for sure what color he has on his back. We might think that we have done many good things during the past year, but we cannot be sure that what we have done is enough in the eyes of HaShem.

Perhaps, knowing my full potential, God expected much more from me. Therefore, since we cannot be sure of the color we have been marked with, we ALL ASSUME (perhaps as a strategy) that we carry a red mark.

2. Knowing this, what do we do now? What actions must we take?

Our advantage over the sheep is that unlike the sheep, our destiny is still in a pending status, because the final verdict remains open until Yom Kippur! Thus, for the following week, we act as if we were in God's death row, awaiting execution. We repent, we cry, we admit our faults, we beg for forgiveness and we try to "convince the Shepherd" with credible arguments that, although during the past year we might have not done great, next year we will! On Yom Kippur, we devote the whole day exclusively to this matter: appealing the possible capital sentence pending in our backs. We resolve to improve but ultimately, we appeal to HaShem's compassion to grant us "hayim," - life, a new opportunity to show Him that we are worthy of our existence.

The magic of Teshuba, the process of repentance, is that HaShem gives us the opportunity to appeal His own verdict.

### **THE SHOFAR**

The most special event of Rosh haShana, also aimed at identifying the Judge and making us feel that we are standing in front of Him - is the blowing of the Shofar, the ram's horn. The Tora does not mention the reason behind the mitzva of Shofar, but our Rabbis do offer a few explanations.

1. In ancient Israel the Shofar was blown when a new King was crowned. In the same way, when hearing the Shofar on Rosh haShana, we "crown" and accept God as our King and also as our Judge. We declare that we are His subjects and as such we are committed to follow His rules. Among other prerogatives the King had the power to sentence to death or spare someone's life. In Rosh haShana we realize that our lives are ultimately in

the hands of God, the supreme King and Judge. Upon hearing the Shofar, we should feel that we are standing in front of God, and that He is now judging us.

If we do not take this idea lightly, we might feel overwhelmed, start to tremble or cry out of fear, since we realize that the Supreme Judge is examining us, and He knows us better than we know ourselves. If this happens, if we cry and tremble when hearing the Shofar, it means that the Shofar is working well, and we are reacting correctly to its deep sound.

2. The Shofar reminds us of aqedat Yitzhaq. Abraham Abinu was ready to sacrifice his own son, following God's commandment. Once Abraham showed his unconditional obedience and love to God, HaShem told him to hold back. Abraham saw a ram caught by its horns in a thicket and he offered it as a sacrifice to HaShem instead of Yitzhaq. The Shofar is a ram's horn. And when we listen to the Shofar, we remember the sacrifice of Yitzhaq. And we ask HaShem to consider what our father Abraham did as a merit for all of us, his descendants.

3. In ancient times, the Shofar was also used as a kind of a siren. It warned the people that the enemy was approaching and about to attack. The Shofar announced that lives were in danger. Everyone became aware of the imminence of death. In Rosh haShana the Shofar serves as a spiritual wake up call. It reminds us of the fragility of our lives and invites us to introspect and repent. The Shofar declares that God is NOW judging us, and our lives are on the line.

While the Shofar is blown, we do not have to admit any guilt, we do not need to confess or repent or even ask for His forgiveness (and needless to say, when hearing the Shofar, we should not be "asking" HaShem for things!). All that is extremely important, but this is not the time. We are always calling God and asking for His attention to our needs, except when we listen to the Shofar! We should perceive in the Shofar a Divine call, a wakeup call. This is the only time that HaShem is calling *us*. He summons us to His court. He expects us

to listen, wake up, acknowledge our misdeeds, confess them, repair and improve.

What remains to be explained in a little more detail is what should we do while we listen to the Shofar, while we are judged by God?

The process of Teshuba formally lasts for 10 days from the beginning of Rosh haShana until the end of Yom Kippur. And in this process, each day and each event has a different role. Once Rosh haShana is over we begin an intense period of repentance, reparation and forgiveness. We ask God and our peers for forgiveness, aiming to repair as much as we can. The process concludes on Yom Kippur, “the Day of Forgiveness.”

But on Rosh haShana, requesting forgiveness would be premature. On that day, one must concentrate on Judging himself in front of God. How should I do that? **Trying to visualize myself, not as I normally do, but as God sees me.**

The voice of the Shofar is a wakeup call for my consciousness and my memory. When I listen to the Shofar, I must look in the mirror and admit my mistakes in my heart. This first step, essential for the whole process of Teshuba is called *bakarat habet*, “admission of my errors.” At that moment I must take charge of my mishaps without evading responsibility. This self-diagnosis is too serious to be taken lightly: it is a prerequisite for what will come after Rosh haShana: confession, repentance, apology, etc.

I will illustrate with an example what we should be doing when we listen to the Shofar.

One of the most important values in Jewish life is *hesed*, generosity. Let’s take this value as an example. First, I have to recall what I did well and what I did wrong this year in this specific area: Have I dedicated enough of my assets, my time and my effort to help others? Was I present when others needed me? How many people have asked me for help and I ignored them? And especially, how many people who needed help and did NOT ask for help (probably out of shame) have I ignored? When I found out that someone was without a job, did I do everything possible to help? When I knew that someone had no place to be, did I open my house for them?

To get deeper in my introspection I must include God’s perspective into the equation. Because when I feel that I am displaying my failures in front of HaShem my self-inquiry becomes more serious.

For example: Given that HaShem was so generous with me, and He gave me means, health, talents, isn’t He expecting from me to share with others what He gave to me?

The main challenge of Rosh haShana is to judge myself as much as possible in the way that God is judging me. Seeing myself *from the balcony*, as He sees me. The more real my perception of God’s perception of me is, the less likely that I will deceive myself clinging to my self-exculpatory narrative, and the more effective my Teshuba will be, and vice versa.

*May HaShem judges us all with mercy, like a loving father.  
May we all have a very good and sweet year.*

## The 7 Levels of Teshuba

*Days 3 - 9*

In his book Menorat haMaor, Rabbi Isaac Abohab, who lived in Spain during the fourteenth century, writes (Pag. 668-669) that there are seven levels of Teshuba (repentance). These levels are divided in terms of time and circumstances, that is: when and why does repentance take place?

Let us clarify that this text does not refer to offenses made towards other people (stealing, offending, cheating, etc.) where in addition to repentance we must ask for forgiveness, restore, compensate, etc., but rather religious offenses, when we do the opposite of what God expects from us.

### First Level of Teshuba: Immediate Regret

*Day 3: September 21<sup>st</sup> / 3<sup>rd</sup> of Tishre*

The first level of Teshuba, which is also the highest, is when one regrets what he or she did wrong immediately, on his own initiative, without the intervention of third parties and without being motivated by external factors. When this happens, says Rabbi Abohab, it is an indication that this individual's conscience is in good shape, awake and active. We will try to understand this profound idea a little better.

Let's imagine a person who drinks too much alcohol and gets drunk. In a first scenario, this person drives his car, runs a red light, is stopped by the police, fined and his driver's license is taken from him. In this scenario, it is inevitable that this individual will regret drinking excessively, simply because he has suffered the consequences of being intoxicated.

Second scenario: a person gets drunk at a social gathering and misbehaves in front of everyone, to the embarrassment of his wife and children. Once sober, his wife or friends rebuke him for his behavior and show him the damage and pain he caused to his loved ones. After this warning, this man will probably regret his drinking.

Third scenario: an individual gets drunk but fortunately for him his intoxication went unnoticed. He was too tired to misbehave and he didn't embarrass anyone. He drove his car, but nothing happened. In short: he did not suffer any serious consequences of his drunkenness.

It is quite possible that in this scenario he will not regret his drinking. Why? Because he did not suffer any negative consequences from his terrible mistake. And thanks to these "positive" circumstances, ironically, this individual is likely to keep drinking excessively and getting drunk again.

Now, if in this last scenario, a person regrets his actions, "despite the fact that nothing serious happened to him", his repentance is considered of the highest level. Why? Because his regret comes directly from his conscience and not from an external factor that opened his eyes: an accident or the intervention of a third party.

This type of repentance reflects that the individual has an inner voice, an active conscience (neshama) that nurtures his ability to recognize his mistakes on his own and correct his bad behavior without another factor or person being involved

Another common example of immediate Teshuba. Let's imagine that I offended another person by saying an inappropriate word to him or her. If I apologize immediately and I say, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean that. I was wrong and I used the wrong words, etc." In most cases, my apologies will be accepted, much more easily than if I apologize later, i.e., when I see this person the next time.

Rabbi Abohab explains that when one commits a transgression towards God or towards others and

repents immediately and by himself, that “transgression” would be considered as a mistake, a slip, an impulsive action, and not a deliberately offensive act.

Rabbi Abohab concludes the exposition of this first level of Teshuba by quoting a text from the Gemara in Berakhot (10a) that says: “If you saw a Tora scholar committing a transgression during the night, in the morning you must assume that he has already

regretted.” Why do we give the benefit of the doubt in this case? A person who studies Tora, like any other human being, is not immune from making mistakes. But the study of the Divine Precepts of the Tora helps us to develop an internal ethical mechanism that keeps our conscience awake and active, and when we do something wrong, the internal alarm goes off, pushing us to repent and apologize on the spot, and prevents us from repeating the same mistake before it becomes a bad habit.

## Second Level of Teshuba: Breaking Bad Habits

*Day 4: September 22<sup>nd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> of Tishre*

As we explained earlier, the highest level of Teshuba (repentance) is when one repents of the mistake he or she made immediately, before repeating it and before that wrong behavior becomes a habit. Reaching this level of moral alertness is the ideal to which we should aspire, and it can only be achieved by keeping our conscience awake.

However, when an individual does not immediately repent from his mistake and repeats it, he faces a different challenge, more difficult to correct, which Rabbi Abohab calls “the second level of Teshuba”: changing bad habits.

Once installed in the brain, habits are difficult to change. Why? Because we get used to doing something wrong to the point that we no longer realize that it is wrong. When a behavior becomes a habit, it is no longer about changing what we do, but about changing who we are.

If you say a bad word or a vulgarity, you must realize your mistake immediately, repent – apologize if the circumstances require it – and make the decision not to make the same mistake again. But when this does not happen, and we ignore the first warning and repeat the same vulgarities over and over again, we “adapt” to this new vocabulary, we tolerate it and in a very short time it becomes our new normal. Part of our routine.

Psychologists explain that habits, both good and bad, are formed when our brain learns something new and, through repetition, the brain becomes “comfortable” with it and stops evaluating or judging the new behavior. This happens to us in many areas of our daily life: eating or drinking excessively, smoking, etc. and also in more subliminal issues that affect our spirituality

and morality. Many times, what we see in the media, movies, shows, etc. contributes to the internalization of bad habits.

Following the previous example: If I expose myself to watching movies in which vulgarities are “normal” it will be much more difficult for me to identify the formation of this habit in my personality. The same thing happens – on a much more serious and dangerous level – when I expose myself to content in the media of permanent examples and models of lack of respect towards parents, infidelity in marriage, disposable relationships, etc. When I watch it, in a way, I accept it. And when I accept it, I am one step closer to doing it ... All of this contributes to the deepening of the problem of bad habits.

“Man is a creature of habit,” said the famous English writer Charles Dickens. When an immoral value becomes routine, the conscience no longer awakens by itself, as it does on the first level of Teshuba. It goes numb. We need an external stimulus to awaken our consciousness and realize that we are doing wrong “even though everyone is doing the same.” The month of Elul is precisely when we dedicate ourselves to this kind of deep “repentance,” that is, reevaluating our daily habits, which have become “normal.”

Throughout this month we get up an hour earlier to recite the Selichot and awaken our “sleeping” consciences. This prayer invites us to reflect and re-evaluate our daily actions. Allowing us to observe ourselves “from the balcony” to identify the bad habits that are now part of our personality and we do not realize. Only when we are able to identify and recognize our bad habits are, we in a position to fix them.

## Third Level of Teshuba: Regret and Security Cameras

*Day 5: September 23<sup>rd</sup> / 5<sup>th</sup> of Tishre*

The third level that Rabbi Abohab lists is when one repents once he can no longer repeat his wrongdoing.

Examples:

**1.** A supermarket employee steals merchandise and takes it home without anyone seeing. As he does not immediately regret it, this action persists for a time and becomes a habit that the employee perfects to avoid being caught. His conscience no longer “protests” against this wrongdoing. Now, his imagination helps the mind to prevent awakening the conscience. How? By made up imaginary excuses: “The owners are very rich.” “They are not affected at all by what I take away.” “They don’t pay me enough.” “I work more than the other employees.” “I deserve to get paid more and it has been a long time since they increased my salary,” etc., etc. These rationalizations numb a healthy feeling of guilt. The stealing continues and regret is not in sight. But one day, the employee comes to work and, oh surprise! The owners have installed security cameras in the supermarket. The circumstances are different now. He can no longer steal without being seen. The brain stops inventing justifications. And ironically, this allows him to realize that he did something wrong and he finally regrets it. Rabbi Abohab indicates that although this individual’s behavior changed because circumstances changed – he no longer has the opportunity to steal as before – this “repentance,” although imperfect, is considered by the Tora as valid.

**2.** A man travels abroad for business. And there, where nobody knows him, he lets himself to be carried away by temptation and proceeds in a wrong way in the sexual area. Then, back home, he regrets what he did.

In his town, where everyone knows him, he can no longer repeat his wrongdoing. And somehow, as Maimonides says, regret is credible when someone repents while in a position to repeat the same mistake but now chooses not to do so thanks to a better understanding of what infidelity means, etc. Either way, says Rabbi Abohab, although this act of repentance occurs when one no longer has the possibility of repeating the previous error, this act of contrition is valid, and his Teshuba, although not perfect, is accepted by God.

**3.** For many years an individual is in a very comfortable financial situation. Some people in need approach him to ask for help, but he constantly says “NO” and refuses to help others. As time goes by, this individual persists in his selfish behavior and does not realize (or does not want to realize) that what he is doing is wrong. Every year during the month of Elul, Rosh haShana, and Yom Kippur, he recites the Selichot, listens to the Shofar, and learns about the importance of giving Tzedaqa, but nothing has an effect on him. After a few years, his businesses go bad and he loses a large part of his assets. He has no money to spare but ironically, now that he can no longer help, he regrets not having helped others when he could. This repentance, says Rabbi Abohab, while not ideal, is valid and accepted by the Creator.

The Sages explain that if we repent while the opportunity for further wrongdoing still exists, the highest level of Teshuba is reached.

But they also said that the doors of the Teshuba are never closed. And HaShem is always willing to accept our repentance, even if it is not perfect.

## Fourth Level of Teshuba: Regret Out of Fear

*Day 6: September 24<sup>th</sup> / 6<sup>th</sup> of Tishre*

We will now explore the fourth level of Teshuba: repentance that takes place when we realize the consequences of our bad actions. As we previously explained, the highest level of Teshuba is when repentance is born spontaneously from self-reflection, when we finally understand that what we were doing is wrong in and of itself; when regret comes from the awakening of our own conscience, or from a renewed desire of reconciliation with our Creator. Repentance at this level reflects our love of God (תשובה מאהבה).

Rabbi Abohab explains that the fourth level of Teshuba occurs, for example, when a teacher or a friend who knows us personally or a Rabbi in one of his sermons warns us directly about the negative consequences of our actions. Our regret is awakened by an external stimulus and by the fear of the consequences.

Menorat haMaor brings an example of this fourth level of Teshuba. The case of the inhabitants of the city of Nineveh. Back in the year 780 before the common era, HaShem revealed himself to the prophet Yona ben Amitai and told him that he should go to a non-Jewish Assyrian city, which had more than 120,000 inhabitants (at that time this high number of inhabitants was very unusual) to warn the inhabitants that the city would be destroyed by their multiple offenses towards God and toward their peers.

We are not going to analyze all the details of this fascinating story. But very briefly: after a failed escape and attempting suicide, Yona arrives in the great Assyrian metropolis and warns the citizens that the city will be destroyed in 40 days. Unexpectedly, the inhabitants of Nineveh *listened to Yona's rebuke*, they were

scared of the Divine punishment and repented. HaShem suspended His decree and spared the city.

Now we will take a look at two details of this story.

1. The Sages of the Talmud praised the way this repentance took place. The people of Nineveh not only dedicated themselves to praying and fasting but also, and mainly, they modified their behavior. The abandonment of our bad habits and our wrong conduct is the final evidence and the highest goal of the Teshuba process. The Sages valued this message of the story of Yona so much that they incorporated it as the official reading of the Haftara on Yom Kippur in the afternoon prayer (Mincha). Indicating what is expected of a Yehudi when Yom Kippur ends: a real and positive change in behavior, and not just fasting, or making empty resolutions or promises to change. We also learn that HaShem is willing to forgive and “cancel” the punishment when our repentance results in an improvement of our behavior.

2. While the fact that the inhabitants of Nineveh believed in the message of the prophet Yona is highly commendable (something that unfortunately did not always happen with our own people...), from the point of view of motivation — that is, how their Teshuba began— this type of repentance is considered of an inferior level, since the ultimate reason for it was self-preservation, i.e., fear of God's retribution. In any case, repentance for fear of Divine punishment, although it is not considered as the ideal form of repentance, is accepted by HaShem. Because as we clearly see in the book of Yona, God listens to the prayers of the inhabitants of Nineveh, forgives them and spares the city.

## Fifth Level of Teshuba: Repenting After Suffering

*Day 7: September 25<sup>th</sup> / 7<sup>th</sup> of Tishre*

The fifth level mentioned by Rabbi Abohab is when one repents as a consequence of having bad experiences or after having suffered difficulties. These difficulties might not be necessarily related to our wrong behavior.

Negative experiences that we have – a health problem or economic difficulties – are seen by our Sages as experiences that can potentially transform us, making us more humble and wiser. Negative experiences can inspire us and push us to reestablish our relationship with the Creator.

There is a very famous paragraph in the Torah, in the book of Debarim (Deuteronomy) chapter 30, verse 4 that refers to the collective Teshuba, to the repentance of the people of Israel when their exile ends. The Tora says:

*“And at the end of days, when you have lived in the midst of all these [sufferings and persecutions], you will return to HaShem your God and obey his voice.”*

This biblical text demonstrates that repentance many times comes as a consequence of having suffered pain and persecution, in this case in the hands of the nations in which we were exiled.

This type of Teshuba, maturing after suffering, is not the ideal Teshuba, since it is not born from a deep introspection, but from external factors that are not in our hands, but I believe that it is the most frequent reason the process of repentance begins.

Many times, we get closer to God and Tora, for example, after having lost a loved one. When an individual loses a family member, first he rebels and, depending on the circumstances, sometimes people “get angry” at the Almighty. But then, as one progresses through the stages of mourning and becomes closer to acceptance, he is reconciled with the Creator. This

reconciliation can take the individual to a spiritual level higher than before. A relationship with God that is closer now than it was before suffering his loss.

Suffering is sometimes the only way to mature, grow, understand and value. When we lack nothing and we have plenty and enjoy a comfortable material quality of life, we can easily forget God, and without planning it, we suffocate our spiritual life. We mistakenly act as if God is there to ask Him for what I need.... And it doesn't even occur to us to thank Him for giving us everything we have.

*Every month, the father sent money to his son who was studying abroad. The father called the son very often, but the son never had time to talk to him. It never occurred to him to call his father and he never thank him for helping him and supporting him financially. So the father decided not to send more money. At first the son said nothing, but after two months, when his money ran out, he called his father. “Hi dad, how are you doing? I miss you! We haven't talked for a while... .. Oh! By the way, you haven't sent me money for two months, did you forget about me? ” The generous father, who did not forget his son, was forced to interrupt his generous gifts and have his son go through some hardships so that he could appreciate all his father was doing for him.*

Rabbi Abohab explains that unfortunately many human beings (probably most of us) remember God only when we need Him, we always call Him to ask and almost never to thank Him. It is possible that, as in the example of the father and son, God's last resort to get our attention and to push us to communicate with Him, is to interrupt the blessings that He gives us and that we take for granted: our health, our tranquility, our prosperity.

From this point of view, says Rabbi Abohab, negative experiences and suffering should always motivate us to reconnect and get closer to Him.

## Sixth Level of Teshuba: Is It Ever Too Late to Repent?

*Day 8: September 26<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> of Tishre*

Regret, no matter how late it happens, always has value. Today we are not dealing with repentance for offenses or damages that we may have caused to other people, but rather with repentance for what we did wrong in the area of religious or moral values; in our relationship with God. If we abandon Judaism, for example, or if we transgressed the principles of the Tora or if we have turned away from God, etc.

In these cases, late regret, even if not ideal, is still positive. Consider for example a Jewish individual who lived his or her entire life away from Tora observance, and begins to realize the importance of his Jewish identity when he is already 65 or 70 years old ... It takes a lot of courage to admit that one has missed the most meaningful values all his life and it takes a lot of courage to reexamine your life's journey at an advanced age. And this is why the great merit of this form of regret cannot be underestimated. Especially when this regret turns into "instruction."

As in the case of a friend of mine who lived all his life away from Judaism, and when he reached 70 years of age, he told his children: "I don't want you to follow my path. Learn Hebrew. Attend Synagogue and embrace our religion." In this case, regret has an additional educational effect, inspiring one's children and friends to act in the right way.

Something similar, but in a different area, happened with a famous actress who used to wear the most expensive natural furs, and after many years of ostentation, when she reached 60 years old, she decided to dedicate the rest of her life to advocate for the protection of animals. This is an example of reparative regret, which although it might happen late in life - and seen perhaps as questionable - has value and should not be underestimated.

There are other cases of late repentance.

We often read in the news about some scandal involving a public official who was caught in an immoral situation – an illicit relationship or an act of corruption. Many times, after the issue becomes public these people would stand in front of the television cameras, and publicly express their regret and ask forgiveness for what they have done and disappointed the public who trusted him, his wife, his relatives, etc. This is undoubtedly a courageous gesture of repentance and contrition.

However, it is questionable in terms of its credibility. Why? Because the process of repentance and apology did not happen *before* this person was caught, but as a consequence of being discovered. It is likely that what prompted this individual to repent is not conscience and conviction but convenience: the fear of losing his job, his reputation, his family, etc. And the doubt will always remain: had not been caught, would he have stopped and repented?

According to Maimonides, credible repentance takes place if it happens while an individual is still involved in a immoral situation and realizes his mistake and stops when no one else knows about it. This would be the scenario of a complete and most credible Teshuba.

Because repentance comes when this person still has the chance to commit the same wrong act, having the same possibilities as before, the same energy and desire, but now he refrains thanks to a process of introspection that generated a new understanding - thanks to a renewed appreciation of religious principles and his resolution to change and be a better person. This is the ideal Teshuba.

Rabbi Abohab explains however, that even when repentance happens at a later time, and is far from ideal, it is still accepted by the Almighty.

## Seventh Level of Teshuba: Repentance Before Death

*Day 9: September 27<sup>th</sup> / 9<sup>th</sup> of Tishre*

אפילו עבר כל ימיו, ועשה תשובה ביום מיתתו ומת  
בתשובתו--כל עוונותיו נמחלין : שנאמר "עד אשר לא  
תחשך השמש" - שהוא יום המיתה--מכלל שאם זכר  
בוראו ושב קודם שימות, נסלח לו

*Even if he transgressed throughout his entire life and repented on the day of his death and died in repentance, all his sins are forgiven as it says [Ecclesiastes 12:2]: "Before the sun is darkened" - This refers to the day of death. Thus, we can infer that if one remembers his Creator and repents before he dies, he is forgiven. (Hilkhot Teshuba 2:1)*

### ULTIMATE CONFESSION

Today we are examining the last of the Seven Levels of Teshuba (repentance) that Rabbi Isaac Abohab describes in his book Menorat haMaor: repentance before death. Let us clarify that according to our Sages, the possibility of doing Teshuba, repenting for the transgressions committed, never expires, not even in the moments before dying. The ideal Teshuba, however, should also include the resolution not to repeat our mistakes in the future (azibat hachet), something that at the time of impending death is obviously not achievable. But anyway, this Teshuba is accepted and is absolutely critical.

The Sages say (see the Hebrew text mentioned above) that if an individual sincerely repents of his or her faults before dying, obtains Divine forgiveness and his soul accesses the World to come (it is worth clarifying that this "forgiveness" refers to sins committed against God and the principles of His Tora, and does not refer to sins and offenses that one committed against peers, neighbors, friends and family, which must be resolved with those affected by one's behavior before being forgiven by God). There is a special Viduy (confession) written especially for the individual who knows he is going to die. In that confession one articulates the transgressions he committed and repents of what he has done wrong.

### REPENT WHILE YOU CAN

Today, being able to do this confession on the deathbed is a bit more unusual than in the past. Why? Because in the past when someone got sick, had a fever or a simple infection, he knew that death was imminent. And the patient used to be conscious until the final moments. Confession / repentance was always seen as an integral part of "preparing to die." But nowadays that B"H we have so many methods of healing, resuscitation and prolonging one's life, in many cases patients are unconscious in the final moments of their lives, intubated, unable to speak, or under the influence of morphine or other very strong medications that help the patient fight pain but impair his ability to speak and communicate.

Therefore, it is advisable to perform this Viduy while one is conscious. There is no reason to fear that this Viduy is a negative omen. On the contrary, many consider this Viduy as a meritorious act that could grant the individual an extension of his life.

### KEEP YOUR CLOTHES CLEAN!

The Sages taught us that the best way to live our existence is by visualizing that each day we live may be the last. When we are aware of our mortality, we live with intensity and purpose and identify the daily balance of our lives. We must not wait until the "last day" to repent, because no one is sure when the last day of her or his life will be.

The Sages of Gemara explained this idea from a verse from Kohelet (9:8): "Your clothes should be clean every day." "The clothes" metaphorically represent "our lives, our records" and this pasuq means that we have to always be ready to present ourselves to God ... In other words, we must repent and repair what we did wrong "daily," since we do not know when we will be summoned before the Celestial Throne. That is why we must look permanently presentable, with clean clothes, that is, without unforgiven faults, or unresolved

conflicts, in case we must suddenly appear before the Creator.

### **FINAL THOUGHTS**

Just like many other rabbis, I have visited in the hospital people who knew they were dying. And there is a theme that is repeated in cases of terminal patients. At the end of their lives, people do not feel as much anguish about mistakes they made (there are exceptions). In the last moments of life, people mainly regret what they should have done and DIDN'T DO: Not having reconciled with a loved one. Not spending more time with children

or family. Or having postponed ad infinitum great projects or ideas to help others. In those sacred moments - which is when one is fully aware of the irretrievability of time - people regret having wasted too much time trying to "have more" instead of having dedicated themselves to "giving more," "helping more," "sharing more." At such times, when you examine the last balance of your own life, no one thinks about the money that is left in the bank. What matters is not what we accumulated during our lives, but what we have done and what we have achieved.

## A Viduy For Our Times

*Day 10: September 28<sup>th</sup> / 10<sup>th</sup> of Tishre (Yom Kippur)*

One of the most important Mitsvot we have in Yom Kippur is the Viduy. Viduy literally means “confession,” and it is one of the steps of Teshuba, repentance. The process of Teshuba, indeed, consists of three steps: admission of our faults (hakarot hahef); confession (Viduy); and the decision to abandon our bad actions and habits (‘azibat hahef).

According to Maimonides the Mitsva of Teshuba is fulfilled when we perform the Viduy. The Viduy records a list of transgressions and flaws. Reading the Viduy helps us in identifying wrongdoings that we might have forgotten or we might have unconsciously suppressed from our memory.

We should not read the Viduy mentally. Rather we must articulate every word, whispering to ourselves the transgressions we committed. Why? Because the Viduy is the culmination of the mental process of taking charge. Same as the concept of catharsis, or the 12 steps programs, only when we are capable of verbally articulating our problems or vices, we have finally admitted them, and only then we are able to change. Once that happens, HaShem accepts our apologies and forgives us.

We say the Viduy in plural, confessing transgressions that we clearly know we have not committed. This teaches us that our moral responsibilities go beyond our personal accountability. In other words, when we see a friend, a family member, or anyone else over whom we have influence, acting wrongly, we should privately and politely rebuke him or her. And if we don’t, it is considered as if we share their wrongdoings. Because we Jews believe in collective responsibility.

The Viduy is written in Hebrew. Now, if we read the Hebrew version of the Viduy and we have no idea what we are saying, then how is admission, regret and contrition, all these critical for Teshuba, is going to happen? That is why, unlike other prayers, it is imperative to understand the words of the Viduy. Therefore, it is not only permitted but necessary to read the Viduy in a language that one understands.

The Viduy I’m presenting here is based on the short Viduy used in the Sephardic Selihot. My translation is a non-literal and expanded rendition of the Viduy, adapting its language to our modern days. This text could be used on Yom Kippur alongside the other Viduyim of Yom Kippur. And hopefully, it will help us understand the main ideas of the Viduy, and assist us in the process of Teshuba.

### VIDUY

*(text follows from left side of the page to right side)*

אָנָּא ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ. תְּבֹא לְפָנֶיךָ  
 תְּפִלָּתֵנוּ. וְאַל תִּתְעַלֵּם מִלִּפְנֵינוּ מִתְחַנְּתָנוּ. שְׂאִין  
 אֲנַחְנוּ עֵזִי פָּנִים וְקֹשֵׁי עֲרֹף לֹמֵר לְפָנֶיךָ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ  
 וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, צְדִיקִים אֲנַחְנוּ וְלֹא חָטְאנוּ. אָבֵל  
 חָטְאנוּ. עֹוִינוּ. פָּשְׁעָנוּ. אֲנַחְנוּ וְאֲבוֹתֵינוּ וְאֲנָשֵׁי  
 בֵּיתֵנוּ :

**ANA HASHEM ELOKENU:** Please Oh, HaShem our God and the God of our Fathers, let our prayer come before You, and do not hide Yourself, our King, from our supplication, for we are not so insolent, nor so obstinate, as to say before You, HaShem, our God, God of our forefathers, that “we are righteous and we have never transgressed”. Rather, we have transgressed, committed iniquity, and sinned; we, as well as our fathers and our family members.

**חטאתי אודיעך ועוני לא כסיתי. אמרתי אודה עלי פשעי לה'. ואתה נשאת עון חטאתי סלה: מכסה פשעיו לא יצליח. ומודה ועזב ירחם:**

**HATATI HODI'AKHA:** "I make my transgression known to You, HaShem. And I do not deny my sins. For I say: it is appropriate that I confess my sins to HaShem, and You will forgive my transgression."

**אשמנו - ASHAMNU:** We have sinned knowingly, fully aware that we were doing something wrong.

**אכלנו מאכלות אסורות - AKHALNU MA-AKHALOT ASUROT:** We have eaten forbidden foods.

**בגדנו - BAGADNU:** We have betrayed our covenant with You. You trusted us with Your Tora and we have not honored our promise to keep Your Tora, study it and fully observe it.

**בטלנו תורתך - BITALNU TORATEKHA:** We have wasted our free time in vanities, frivolities and nonsense, instead of studying the words of Your Tora, which bring us closer to You.

**גזלנו - GAZALNU:** We have robbed. We have taken, kept or spent what does not belong to us.

**גנבנו - GANAVNU:** We have stolen valuables and material goods. We have stolen time from our employers. We have stolen from many people in many different ways.

**גאינו - GA-INU:** We have been arrogant. We have acted disrespectfully with our friends, family members and colleagues.

**דברנו דפי ולשון הרע - DIBARNU DOFI VELESHON HARA':** We have spoken gossip, and we have said negative things — Leshon haRa — about other people. We have spread rumors about others. Rumors that, if they were said about us, would surely have made us feel embarrassed and hurt.

**DIBARNU EHAD BAPE VE-EHAD BALEB:** We were cynics, hypocrites. We have spoken one thing with our mouth, while feeling (or intending) another thing in our hearts.

**העוינו - HE'EVINU:** We have brought about corruption, injustice and iniquity.

**הרהרנו הרהורים רעים ביום - HIRHARNU HIRHURIM RA'IM BAYOM...:** We directed our minds to entertain promiscuous fantasies during the day, and consequently brought upon ourselves impurity at night.

**והרשענו - VEHIRSHA'NU:** We have behaved wrongly we have caused others to imitate our bad behavior.

**יעדנו עצמנו לדבר עברה - VPADNU 'ATSMENU LIDBAR 'ABERA:** We have gathered with others for sinful purposes. Attended inappropriate places or indecent gatherings.

**זדנו - ZADNU:** We have sinned deliberately and with premeditation.

**זנינו אחר לבנו ועינינו - ZANINU AHAR LIBENU...:** We let ourselves follow our hearts and our eyes to forbidden behavior.

**המסנו - HAMASNU:** We have extorted and exploited other people. We took things that do not belong to us.

**המדנו - HAMADNU:** We have been jealous and envious of others. We were not happy, satisfied and grateful with the blessings that You, HaShem, have given us.

**טפלנו שקר ומרמה - TAFALNU SHEQER UMIRMA:** We made up lies and deceitful stories, to conceal ourselves and our iniquity. To deceive our friends or our customers. To make money dishonestly.

**יַעֲצֵנוּ עֲצוֹת רָעוֹת - YA'ATSNU 'ETSOT RA'OT:**

We have given bad advice to friends and strangers, advising them to do what was good for us, rather than what was good for them. We betrayed their trust, giving biased guidance, prioritizing our personal gain and interest.

**כִּזְבָּנוּ - KIZABNU:** We have lied to friends and family members.

**כָּעֲסָנוּ - KA'ASNU:** We have overreacted. We have lost our tempers—a sin which the Rabbis compared with idol worshiping because of its irrationality and destructiveness. We lost our patience with our children and spouses and got angry at them unfairly.

**לִצְנוּ - LATSNU:** We have acted frivolously—doing wrong things that later we came to regret. We lost consciousness of the nature of time and the shortness of our life. We wasted precious time in foolishness. A “time” that we will never be able to recover back.

**לוֹצְצָנוּ - LOTSATSNU:** We have mocked and ridiculed others. We have bullied others. We have embarrassed friends and relatives in public. We have called other people with embarrassing nicknames.

**מַרְדָּנוּ - MARADNU:** We have acted rebelliously toward You. We knew what was the right thing to do in Your eyes, and yet we acted differently, out of arrogance and vanity.

**מַרְיֵנוּ דְבָרֶיךָ - MARINU DEBAREKHA:** We have disobeyed Your words. We did not care to study, learn and understand what You commanded us.

**נִאֲצָנוּ - NI'ATSNU:** We have infuriated You, by repeatedly and deliberately committing the very same transgressions which we had come to regret in the past, and for which we had asked forgiveness from You in the past.

**נִאֲפָנוּ - NI-AFNU:** We have been unfaithful to our spouses.

**נִשְׁבַּעְנוּ לְשׂוּא וְלִשְׁקֵר - NISHBA'NU LASHAV VELASHEQER:** We have sworn in vain and falsely.

**נִדְרָנוּ וְלֹא שְׁלָמְנוּ SHILAMNU:** We have promised, yet we have not fulfilled our promises. We have not kept our word. We have pledged money to charity and T'sedaqa, and have not fulfilled our promises.

**סָרָרְנוּ - SARARNU:** We have been deviant. We have abandoned the path of righteousness.

**סוֹרְרִים וּמוֹרִים הָיִינוּ - SORERIM UMORIM HAYNU:** We have been disrespectful and rebellious to elders, to Tora scholars and to our teachers.

**עֲוִינוּ - 'AVINU:** We have committed injustice. We have been insensitive to the suffering of others. To the needs of the poor. To the sentiments of the orphans. To the feelings of the widow.

**עֲבָרְנוּ עַל מִצְוֹת עֲשֵׂה - 'ABARNU AL MITSVOT 'ASE:** We have failed in performing Your commandments. We have transgressed Your prohibitions. We have violated commandments which deserve the highest punishment (Karet).

**עֲבָרְנוּ עַל חִלּוּל הַשֵּׁם - 'ABARNU AL HILUL HASHEM:** We have desecrated Your Name. By our wrongful behavior, by our misdeeds and dishonesty, we have caused others, Jews and gentiles, to think or talk negatively about the People of Israel and about You, the God of Israel.

**פָּשַׁעְנוּ - PASHA'NU:** We have sinned willfully, defying openly and without shame Your word, Your commandments and Your will.

**פָּגַמְנוּ בְּאוֹת בְּרִית קֹדֶשׁ - PAGAMNU BE-OT BERIT QODESH:** We have desecrated the sign of our pact, the Berit Mila, by committing sexual offenses and engaging in promiscuous behavior.

**צָרָרְנוּ - TSARARNU:** We have oppressed other human beings, Jews and gentiles. We have mistreated and abused our employees, our maids, and those who work with us or for us. We have humiliated and hurt those who deserve our patience, respect and kindness.

**צָעָרְנוּ אָב וְאֵם - TSP'ARNU AB VA-EM:** We have caused suffering to our parents by disobeying them, by being disrespectful to them, by not honoring them and by not taking good care of them as we should, thus violating the Fifth of the Ten Commandments.

**קָשִׁינוּ עָרָף - QISHINU 'OREF:** We have been stubborn, narrow minded and obstinate. We did not change our minds or opinions, even when we knew that we were wrong. We acted arrogantly when we did not ask forgiveness from our friends and relatives for having offended them. We did not listen to the reasonableness of opposing viewpoints or consider if our own opinions need to be adjusted.

**קִלְקַלְנוּ צְנוּרוֹת הַשָּׁפַע - QILQALNU TSINOROT HASHEFA:** We have denied from ourselves receiving all Your blessings. We rejected the means by which You bestow upon us Your abundance. We have chosen to willfully ignore everything You commanded us, all of which is for our own good.

**רָשָׁעְנוּ - RASHA'NU:** We have been wicked. Through our wickedness, we have hurt and caused pain to our friends, children, family members and loved ones.

**רָעִים לְשָׂמִים - RA'IM LASHAMAYIM:** We have acted wickedly against You and against our peers. We acted according to our *poor* judgment, ignoring Your *infinite* Judgment, as expressed in Your Tora.

**שְׁחַתְנוּ - SHIHATNU:** We have corrupted ourselves. We have learned how to deceive and lie. And at the end, deception became part of our personalities.

**שִׁקְרָנוּ - SHIQARNU:** We have spoken falsely and deceitfully.

**שְׁחַתְנוּ זֵרַע קֹדֶשׁ - SHIHATNU ZERA QODESH:** We have wasted our holy seed. We did not keep our eyes clean and pure. We have looked deliberately at inappropriate images, causing the seeds of life to be wasted.

**תַּעֲבָנוּ - TPAVNU:** We have committed abominations. We have performed the actions that You abhor and which You taught us to reject: injustice, oppression, deception.

**תַּעֲתֵנוּ וְתַעֲתֵנוּ - TA'INU VETPATA'NU:** We have taken the wrong paths. We have dragged other people to join us in our wrong ways. We have pushed others to commit the same sins we committed, to make us feel less uncomfortable and less lonely in our depravity. We have given the wrong example to our sons and daughters, and those who naturally learn from and imitate what we do. We have not inspired our children with a good example, and we have failed in teaching our children—the souls that You have entrusted in our hands—to avoid that which is wrong in Your eyes.

**וְסָרְנוּ מִמִּצְוֹתֶיךָ וּמִמִּשְׁפָּטֶיךָ - VESARNU:** We have turned away from Your commandments and from Your Laws. And at the end, our rebelliousness has not served us any good. You are Just and Righteous in Your judgment and in Your verdict. We admit that whatever befalls us is our own fault and responsibility. You have taught us to seek righteousness, but we have brought wickedness upon ourselves.