

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XLI: Pinchas (Num. 25:10–30:1)

Essay 4. Atonement at Rosh Hashana is like receiving a new soul

מִדְרָשׁ רַבָּה עַל פְּסוּק "יּוֹם תְּרוּעָה יִהְיֶה לָכֶם וַעֲשִׂיתֶם עֲלֵיהֶם", אָמַר רַב תַּחְלִיפָא בְּכֹל מוֹסְפֵיין כְּתִיב "וַהֲקִרְבָתֶם" וְכֵן כְּתִיב וַעֲשִׂיתֶם "עֲלֵיהֶם" הֲאֵי כִי צִדָּד? אָמַר לָהֶם הַקַּב"ה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל בְּנֵי אֲנִי מַעֲלָה עָלֵיכֶם כְּאִילוּ הַיּוֹם נַעֲשִׂיתֶם לְפָנַי, כְּאִילוּ הַיּוֹם בְּרַאתִי אֶתְכֶם בְּרִיאָה תְּדַשָּׁה, הֲדָא הוּא דְכְתִיב "כִּי כֹאשֶׁר הַשָּׁמַיִם הַחֲדָשִׁים וְהָאָרֶץ הַחֲדָשָׁה" עכ"ל.

There is a **Midrash Lev. Rabbah (29:12) on the verse[s]** describing Rosh Hashana: **“A day of shofar blasts it should be for you; and you shall make a burnt offering”** (Num. 29:1-2). **Rav Tachlifa said, “For all of the [other] additional offerings, it is written, ‘And you shall bring near,’ but here it is written, ‘[And you shall make] a burnt offering.’¹ Why is this? The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Israel, ‘My children, I will count it for you as if you were made in front of Me today; as if I created you [as] a new creature today.’ This is [the understanding of] that which is written, ‘For as the new heaven and the new earth [which I shall make]’ (Isaiah 66:22).”**

יֵשׁ לְדַקְדָּק מַהוּ זֶה הַתּוֹעֵלֶת שֶׁהַיּוֹם נַעֲשׂוּ, אוֹ שֶׁנַּעֲשׂוּ מֵעַצְמָם כְּמוֹ שֶׁפִּירֵשׁ הַיְפָה תוֹאֵר, וְלָמָּה חֲזַר לוֹמַר כְּאִילוּ הַיּוֹם בְּרַאתִי אֶתְכֶם בְּרִיאָה תְּדַשָּׁה, דְּהֵינּוּ הַדָּ? וְאֵם הַתּוֹעֵלֶת בָּא לָהֶם מִחֲמַת שֶׁנַּעֲשׂוּ מֵעַצְמָם, אִם כֵּן כְּאִילוּ הַיּוֹם בְּרַאתִי אֶתְכֶם וְכו'.

We should scrutinize what the benefit is that they were made before Him today, or that they were [re]made of themselves, as the Yafeh To'ar explains.^{2,3} Also, why did He repeat

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¹ The translator has corrected the text of the first edition, which in quoting Num. 29:2 and in quoting Rav Tachlifa has the word אָשָׁה (from Num. 15:3). Both words represent a burnt offering. So was Rav Tachlifa wrong to say “for all [other] additional offerings, it says ‘And you shall bring near,’ ” as Num. 15:3 doesn’t have that language? Rashi writes that the text of Num. 15:3 was not a command, “you shall make a burnt offering,” but the intent was, “When you will come there and it enters your mind to make a fire-offering unto the L-rd.” Thus, Num. 29:2 is unique in that it is a command to bring a burnt offering, but does not use the language of the other commands, which include the word, “And you shall bring near.”

² Rabbi Samuel ben Isaac Ashkenazi Jaffe (d. late 16th century), rabbi of the Ashkenazi community of Constantinople. Yafeh To'ar was his commentary to the Midrash Rabbah: Genesis (Venice, 1597–1606); Exodus (Venice, 1597); and Leviticus (Constantinople, 1648).

³ The Yafeh To'ar says עָשׂוּ אֶת עַצְמָם, they made themselves. Zera Shimshon twice writes, עָשׂוּ מֵעַצְמָם. Whether the added *mem* was an accident or intentional, it sounds like “they were [re]made of themselves.” That seems to make

[Himself], saying, “as if I created you [as] a new creature today”? This is apparently the same thing as saying “as if you were made in front of me today”? Also, if the benefit comes to them because they [re]made of themselves, as the Yafeh To’ar explains, then it’s as if “I created you [as] a new creature today,” so even according to the Yafeh To’ar’s explanation, it seems repetitive?

דמשמע ששהקב"ה יברא אותם, גריעות הוא להם.

The solution is **that the meaning that the Holy One, Blessed be He, will create them anew, means that [their remaking of themselves] is inferior.** The statement “as if you were made in front of Me today” uses the verb נַעֲשִׂיתֶם, with the root עשה. This is translated as “made,” i.e., an act that can be completed by man, using pre-existing material. Remaking ourselves may not be sufficient to cleanse us of sin, if we are being [re]made of inferior material. But “as if I created you [as] a new creature today” uses the verb בָּרָאתִי, with the root ברא, which is a creation *ex nihilo*, a creation from nothing, and not from inferior material. This type of creation can only be done by G-d, as in Gen. 1:1. So the two statements attributed to G-d by the midrash are not identical.

If the second statement “as if I created you [as] a new creature today” indicates a more powerful action, an action by G-d, then why do we need the first statement, “as if you were made in front of Me today” i.e., “by your own actions”? It is because the person must still be sincere in his repentance; he must still strive to remake himself.

ועוד קשה הרצאה שמביא מפסוק "כי כאשר השמים החדשים" וכו', דזה מיירי לעתיד בחידוש העולם ומה שייך עם בראתי אתכם בריאה חדשה?

Another difficulty is the proof that is brought from the verse, ‘For as the new heaven and the new earth which I shall make,’ for this verse is speaking about the future in the renewal of the earth in the days of the Messiah. How is this verse connected with, “I created you [as] a new creature,” which is speaking about the repentance achieved with the High Holy Days?

ויש לומר שהענין הוא כן, שהתשובה באמת היא מכפרת אבל עדיין צריך למרק הנאות החטא. וזה נעשה לפעמים על ידי ייסורין, ולפעמים על ידי רחמים עליונים. וזהו שאנו אומרים מחוק ברתמיה הרבים אבל לא על ידי ייסורין וכו'. ומעתה אם צדיק אחד חטא שבנדאי נעשה תשובה תכף ומיד כדאמרין אם ראית תלמיד חכם שעבר עבירה בלילה, אל תהר[ה]ר אחריו ביום וכו'.

It can be said that the matter is thus: that the repentance of the sincere Jew’s prayers on the High Holy Days does effect atonement, but he still needs to be cleansed from the enjoyment of the sin. This is accomplished sometimes by suffering, and sometimes by the

sense in light of the point made in the next paragraph, that the creative action of man, with the verb עשה, is a making of something from the materials at hand, so that “they were [re]made of themselves.”

supernal mercy. This is as we say, “The sins I have committed, erase in your abounding mercies, but not through suffering or severe illnesses.”⁴ Henceforth, if one righteous man sins, he will certainly repent immediately, as it is said in Berachot 19a, “It was taught in the school of Rabbi Yishmael: If you saw a Torah scholar transgress a prohibition at night, do not think badly of him during the day; perhaps he has repented [in the meantime].”

הדין הנה נותן שתהיה תשובתו מקובלת לגמרי ולא יהיה צריך כלל לייסורין, ולהפך אם חוטא אחד הרבה לפשוע ואחר כך שב בתשובה שזאת התשובה לא תכפר לו לגמרי אלא שעדיין יהיו צריכין לייסורין למרק הנאת החטאים. אבל אנו רואים שהעולם אינו מתנהג על פי סדר זה, שהרי יש קונה עולמו בשעה אחת, ויש צדיקים שנידונים בייסורים רבים.

The rule is given that [the usually righteous man's] repentance is accepted completely and there is no need at all for suffering. Conversely, if one sinner commits many transgressions and afterward returns in repentance, this repentance does not atone for him completely; to the contrary, suffering is still needed to cleanse the enjoyment of the sin. But we see that the world does not behave according to this system, for there is one ordinary man who acquires his World to Come in one hour, while there are the righteous who are condemned to much suffering.

וכן אמרינו בירושלמי דביכורים: חכם חתן נשיא גדולתו מכפרת, וקשה דאם מיירי בלא תשובה פשיטא שהגדולה אין לה כל כך פת לכפר, ואי מיירי בתשובה הלא בלאו הגדולה יש התשובה שמכפרת? אלא ודאי צריך לומר שהתשובה מכפרת אבל אינה מסרת החטא לגמרי, ולעולם צריך לייסורין למרק החטא, ומי שזוכה לעלות לגדולה ניצול מן היסורין ונתפטר לגמרי, והיינו המירוק שנעשה על ידי הרחמים עלינו.

Thus, it is said in the Jerusalem Talmud, in tractate Bikkurim (section 3, halacha 3): “A Torah scholar, a groom, and a prince are atoned for by their greatness.” This is difficult to understand, for if it is talking about their greatness alone, without repentance, then it is obvious that their greatness does not have such a great power as to affect atonement. If it is talking about a great power combined with repentance, then even without the greatness, wouldn't repentance affect atonement? But surely it must be said that the repentance atones, but does not completely turn aside the sin, and there is always a need for suffering for the cleansing of sin. He who merits to rise to greatness will be saved from the suffering and will be completely atoned, and this cleansing is done by the supernal mercy.

⁴ Siddur, Keri'at Shema al Hamita. Cf. Berachot 17a, “After his prayer, Rava said the following: My G-d, before I was created I was worthless, and now that I have been created it is as if I had not been created [I am no more significant]. I am dust in life, all the more so in my death. I am before You as a vessel filled with shame and humiliation. Therefore, may it be Your will, L-rd my G-d, that I will sin no more, and that those [transgressions] that I have committed, cleanse in Your abundant mercy; but [may this cleansing] not be by means of suffering and serious illness [but rather in a manner I will be able to easily endure]. And this is the confession of Rav Hamnuna Zuti on Yom Kippur.”

ובנה נבוא לביאור המדרש, בכל המוספין פתיב "והקרבתם," דהיינו שהחוטא מתקרב עצמו לקדושה על ידי הקרבן, והקרבן מועיל לו לכפרתו ולהקריבו אל הקדושה. אבל עדיין צריך למרק הנאת החטא ולתקן כל מה שפגם. ואפשר שיהיה נמי על ידי יסורין.

In this way, we will come to the interpretation of the Midrash, “for all the [other] additional sacrifices, i.e., when it is not Rosh Hashana, it is written, ‘and you shall bring near,’ ” which is to say, that the sinner brings himself close to holiness by the sacrifice, and the sacrifice is beneficial to him for his atonement and for bringing him close to holiness. But it’s still necessary to cleanse the enjoyment of the sin and to correct all that it harmed. It is possible this can also be done by suffering.

ובכאן פתיב "ועשיתם" וכו', כאילו היום עשיתם עצמכם לפני, דהיינו כמו גר שנתגייר בקטן שגולד דמי, באופן שהעבירות הקודמות לא תזכרנה עוד.

In this case, when it is Rosh Hashana, it is written, “and you shall make a burnt offering,” as if today you have [re]made yourselves before Me, that is, like “a convert who just converted, who is like a child [just] born,”⁵ in a way that previous offenses will no longer be remembered.

ואם תאמרו אף בגר שנתגייר איך מאן דאמר בהחולץ שהם מעוניים וייסורין באים עליהם מחמת שלא קיימו מצוות קודם שנתגיירו, ואם פן מה תועלת לנו להיות גר שנתגייר. משום הכי הוסיף "כאילו היום בראתי אתכם בריאה חדשה", דכתיב "כי כאשר השמים החדשים", דהיינו כאילו כבר נתתי לכם נשמה חדשה משל העתיד, דכתיב בהו "ונתתי לכם לב חדש" וכו', "ונהסרתי את-לב האבן" וכו' "ונתתי לכם לב בשר", שלא תקבלו יסורין כלל.

If you’ll say that even for a convert who converted, there is one, Rabbi Chananya, son of Rabban Gamliel, who said in tractate Yevamot, chapter 4, which is entitled, “A man whose brother has died childless”: “Why are converts at the present time tormented, and hardships come upon them? Because [when they were gentiles] they did not observe the seven Noachide commandments.”⁶ Because of this, [G-d] added, as stated in our Midrash: “As if I created you [as] a new creature today,” as it is written, “For as the new heaven and the new earth which I shall make.” That is, “As if I already gave you a new soul from the future,” as it is written about them, “And I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit into you: I will remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezek. 36:26), which is like saying, “That you will not receive any suffering at all.”

⁵ Yevamot 22a, 48b, 62a, 97b; Bekhorot 47a: “[The legal status of] a convert who [just] converted is like that of a child [just] born . . .”

⁶ Yevamot 48b.

וְזֶה בְּשִׁבְלֵי כְבוֹד וּקְדוּשַׁת הַיּוֹם שְׁגוּרָם כָּהֵן, שֵׁשׁ תּוֹסֵפֶת טְהָרָה וּקְדוּשָׁה בְּנִשְׁמָהּ, מִחֲמַת הַרְגֵל כְּנוֹדָע, וְכַלּוֹמֵר שֶׁתְּהִיּוּ כְּמוֹ הַגֵּרִים לְסִבְרָא שֶׁל רַבִּי יוֹסִי שְׁאִין פּוֹקְדִים עֲלֵיהֶם שׁוּם חֲטָא הַקְּדוּם, לְפִי שֶׁנִּשְׁתַּנּוּ בְּגוּף וְנַפְשׁוֹ.

It is because of the honor and holiness of the day, i.e., Rosh Hashana, that causes this: that there is an additional purity and holiness in the soul, because of the holiday, as is known. It's as if to say that you will be like the converts according to the reasoning of Rabbi Yossi, that they are not censored for any earlier sin, because it's as if they have been changed in body and soul.⁷

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⁷ In Yevamot 48b, Rabbi Yossi states that converts are not punished for their deeds prior to their conversion, because “a convert who just converted is like a child just born [in that he retains no connection to his past life]. Rather, for what reason do they experience suffering? It is because they are not as well-versed in the intricacies of the mitzvot as a born Jew [and consequently they often inadvertently transgress mitzvot].”