



Teshuvah starts now

By Rav Natan Freller

The main Parashah chosen for Rosh Hashanah is the famous story of Avraham being tested and commanded to sacrifice his own beloved child, Itzhak.

We will never know how this story would have ended without divine intervention. In the last minute, God speaks to Avraham and commands him to stop and sacrifice a ram instead. In the same way, we are tested every day in any decision we make.

Am I choosing to do the right thing? This question is in my head for almost every decision I make, even more so during this season.

Some of us surely already experienced the expectation of a divine voice to sound and tell us what to do. Unfortunately, it does not happen very often, or at all.

Our Rabbis taught in the Talmud that after the destruction of the Second Temple, the prophecy ceased in Israel and was replaced with Torah study and midrash.

The way we explore the wisdom of our tradition is our way of listening to the divine calling.

Jewish tradition starts the preparation for the High Holidays when the month of Elul starts, giving us an entire month to prepare spiritually for the big day. We are invited to dedicate ourselves to do Teshuvah during this entire time – a wise advice that this is a process, and not a magical moment of revelation.

So when should I start this process? What should I do? Is there any specific order? How much should I dedicate of myself to it?

The Torah talks about Teshuvah in the book of Devarim (chapter 30):

If you hear to the voice of Adonai your God, by keeping the divine commandments and laws— that are recorded in this book of the Teaching, if you return (tashuv) to Adonai your God with all your heart and with all your being. For the commandment that I command you today is not too extraordinary for you, and it is not too far away! It is not in the heavens, for you to say: “Who will go up for us to the heavens and get it for us and have us hear it, that we may observe it?” And it is not across the sea, for you to say: “Who will cross for us, across the sea, and get it for us and have us hear it, that we may observe it?” Rather, near to you is the word, exceedingly, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it!

This small passage of the Torah teaches us that the Mitzvah of Teshuva is something real and possible. It needs to be done with all of our hearts and souls.

Our tradition divides our mistakes in two categories. “*Bein adam lamakom*” – Sins against the divine and “*Bein adam lechavero*” – Sins against our friends.

Sins such as verbal attacks, assaults, ethical and moral misconduct are not forgiven automatically on Yom Kippur. On our preparation for that day, we need to deal with the implications of our actions. Just as we cannot replace God's mercy and compassion for us, God cannot replace our humanity and forgive us for what we have done against our fellows.

Different than the angels, we are not perfect, and we do make mistakes. Thank God, we can fail and still be here to improve and develop ourselves. Every mistake is seen as an opportunity to repent and renew our lives for better. The key to human nature is the freedom to change. Teshuva changes the world, and this change starts with each one of us.

Teshuva as a concept has three different meanings:

Return; Repent and Answer.

Return to the situation where we made a mistake, if possible, in action, if not, in our minds.
Repent and evaluate the situation from a different perspective.

Answer your calling by making it better next time, we are always learning and improving.

It isn't always possible to go back to the same situation or to fix that exact mistake. In these cases, the process of Teshuva will only come to an end once we find ourselves again in a similar situation and choose to act in a different way, showing our growth by not making the same mistake again.

Let's not wait until Yom Kippur to do the work. This is our opportunity to give time and think through our past year, looking ahead to the one that is about to come.

Judaism is alive. Etz Hayim is open. We have an opportunity to create many things together.
May we be present during this time of preparation and reflection.

May we find meaning in our traditions, renewing them and making them holy.
May we continue to grow in our lives and as a community.

May we all find ourselves in this process so we can be ready for the year ahead.

Shanah Tovah!