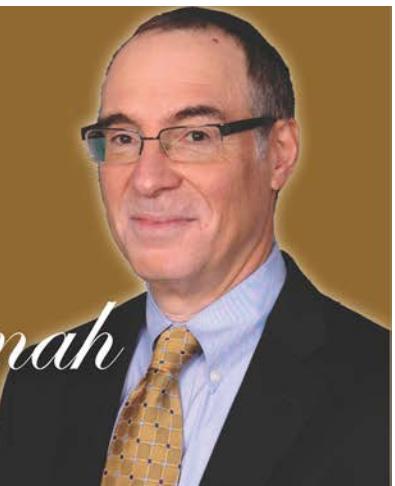




Thoughts on Rosh HaShanah

by Rabbi Bernie Fox



This week's

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Taking a Walk with Hashem

And you will return to Hashem, your G-d, and obey His voice according to all that I command you this day – you and your children – with all your heart, and with all your soul. And Hashem your G-d will reverse your captivity, and have compassion upon you. He will return and gather you from all the peoples, where Hashem your G-d has scattered you. If your dispersion be to the ends of the Earth, from there Hashem, your G-d, will gather you and from there He will take you. Hashem, your G-d, will bring you to the land that your fathers possessed, and you will possess it. He will do good to you and multiply you more than your fathers. (Sefer Devarim 30:2-5)

1. Asking Hashem for forgiveness

Each day, in the *Amidah*, we ask Hashem to forgive us. We express our request with two phrases. We ask that as our father He grant us *selichah* and that as our king He grant *mechilah*. These two expressions seem redundant. The terms *selichah* and *mechilah* are near synonyms. Both seem to refer to forgiveness. However, the terms *selichah* and *mechilah* are not identical in their meanings. *Selichah* does mean forgiveness. However, *mechilah* is better translated as pardon. Why do we ask Hashem our father to forgive us and as our king to pardon us?

These two phrases correspond to the duality of our relationship with Hashem. Hashem acts toward us with love and kindness. We recognize this aspect of our relationship through referring to Him as our father. He created the universe and all that is within it. As creator, He is the sovereign of the universe.

Each of these relationships demands our obedience to Hashem. Like a parent, Hashem cares for us and nurtures us. He provides for our needs. We reciprocate and demonstrate our love and respect for Him and acknowledge His kindness through our faithfulness and dedication. Our obedience is also an acknowledgement of His sovereign authority to legislate and decree according to His will. Our wrongdoings conflict with both of these relationships. They are a failing to reciprocate the love of Hashem, our father. They are a violation of the directives of Hashem, the king.

Rabbaynu David Avudraham explains that we ask forgiveness from Hashem because He is our father. A father's love for his children moves him to forgive his child when the child's behaviors

have been improper and even hurtful. We do not ask Hashem, our king, to forgive us. A king demands the obedience of his servants. When disobedient, they have no right to expect forgiveness. However, they may petition their king for his pardon. We turn to Hashem, our king, and we ask that He pardon our sins.¹

In short, Hashem is our ruler and our father. When we sin we do injustice to both of these relationships. When we repent, we ask Hashem – our king – to pardon us. We ask Hashem – our father – to forgive us and restore to us His love and compassion.

How perfect is the character of repentance! Yesterday, this person was alienated from Hashem the G-d of Israel... He cried out and received no response... He performed mitzvot and they were torn up before him... Today, he is attached to the Divine Presence... He cries out and is immediately answered... He performs mitzvot and they are accepted with grace and pleasure...

Furthermore, He desires them... (Maimonides, Laws of Repentance 7:7)

2. The power of repentance

In the first chapter of his *Laws of Repentance*, Maimonides explains that when a person commits a sin, he is required to repent – to perform *teshuvah*. *Teshuvah* is essential to securing atonement. Sometimes, repentance alone is adequate to secure atonement. More severe sins require more extensive measures. For example, some sins are not atoned for through repentance alone but through repentance and observance of Yom Kippur.²

In the seventh chapter of his *Laws of Repentance*, Maimonides returns to the role of *teshuvah*. He explains that *teshuvah* has enormous impact. The above quotation summarizes his position. Repentance restores the relationship between the repentant sinner and Hashem. With repentance, any vestige of alienation between the wrongdoer and Hashem is wiped away. The relationship that existed before the sin is fully restored.

It is notable that Maimonides places these two descriptions of the efficacy of repentance in separate chapters of his presentation. However, this treatment is easily understood based upon the above discussion. The first chapter of Maimonides' *Laws of Repentance* is devoted to the process of atonement. Atonement is akin to pardon. It is a requirement engendered by violation of the directive of the sovereign. In this context, Maimonides does not discuss the affect of *teshuvah* upon the relationship between the master and his servant. Sin is an act of rebellion against Hashem and requires repentance if it is to be pardoned.

In the seventh chapter of his *Laws of Repentance*, Maimonides is discussing the capacity of *teshuvah* to restore the relationship of love and compassion between the repentant sinner and Hashem. This restoration is not an expression of our relationship to Hashem as His servants and subjects. It is an expression of the father/child relationship. As our father, He eagerly awaits our repentance. When we return to Him, He responds by again loving us as His children.

Recall and do not forget that you angered Hashem, your G-d, in the wilderness. From the day that you went forth from the Land of Egypt until you came to this place you were rebellious toward Hashem. (Sefer Devarim 9:7)

3. The promise of forgiveness

Sefer Devarim describes Moshe's final address to Bnai Yisrael. Much of this address is a rebuke. Moshe reminds Bnai Yisrael of their wrongdoings during their travels in the wilderness. He warns them to not return to these behaviors. He describes the blessings that the nation will secure through its faithfulness and the consequences for disobedience. Clearly, his intent is to communicate to the nation that it must be faithful to Hashem and not repeat past errors.

Nachmanides suggests that the presentation has another important message. Moshe wants to assure the people that although when they sin and even if they abandon the Torah, they will not be destroyed. Hashem is a G-d of mercy. He will eagerly await their repentance. When Bnai Yisrael returns to Hashem, He will return to them.³

1 Rabbaynu David Avudraham, *Commentary on the Blessings and Prayers*, p. 98.

2 Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Teshuvah, Chapter 1.

3 Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), *Commentary on Sefer Devarim*, Introduction.

Moshe understands that this is a remarkable assurance. A king will pardon an errant servant. He may indulge his subjects and overlook wrongdoings. However, a king cannot be expected to forgive acts of rebellion. The king is a ruler. He demands obedience. His relationship with his subjects is an expression of his rights as ruler and of their duties as his subjects. It is not a relationship predicated upon love or compassion. If the people reject their king, they cannot expect their king to completely forget their disloyalty.

Yet, Moshe assures the people that they can secure Hashem's forgiveness. He presents Hashem not only as a ruler but also as a father – eager to restore His relationship with His repentant children. He demonstrated the reality of this relationship by reviewing the sins that they committed in the wilderness – some of them terrible acts of rebellion. Hashem forgave their wrongdoings. He had not forsaken them and with their repentance their relationship to their Father in Heaven was restored.

In Parshat Nitzavim, Moshe emphasizes this message. His message is captured in the opening quotation above. He explains that even in exile we will not be forgotten or abandoned. We need to merely return to Hashem and He will return to us. He will gather us from all of the lands of our exile. He will restore us to the Land of Israel and He will bestow upon us blessings that will exceed even those bestowed upon our ancestors.

Hashem will establish you as a sacred nation as He has sworn to you – when you observe the commandments of Hashem, your G-d, and you travel in His ways. (Sefer Devarim 28:9)

4. Walking with Hashem

In the above passage, Moshe admonishes the people to perform the commandments of the Torah and to go in the ways of Hashem. According to Maimonides, the directive to travel in Hashem's ways is one of the Torah's positive commandments. How does one travel in the ways of Hashem? Maimonides explains that we are to treat His behaviors as a model for our own behaviors. We are to regard Hashem as the model for all virtues. Just as He is merciful, we are to be merciful. Just as Hashem acts with compassion, so we are to conduct ourselves with compassion.⁴

The mishne in *Perke Avot* explains that a righteous person is slow to anger and is easily appeased.⁵ The above discussion suggests a basis for the mishne's position. Hashem is the model for all virtues. Certainly, His patience with us demonstrates that He is very slow to anger. His eagerness to forgive us demonstrates that He is easily appeased.

In the coming days we turn to Hashem and we petition His pardon. However, we seek more than His pardon. We ask that He forgive us and restore the loving relationship that we shattered with our wrongdoings toward Him. If we are to make this request of Hashem with sincerity, we must be willing to forgive those we feel have harmed us. We must be willing to do more than pardon; we must be willing to forgive. We must be prepared to again love those from whom we have become estranged.

⁴ Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Sefer HaMitzvot*, *Mitzvat Aseh* 8.

⁵ Mesechet Avot 5:11



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