

Thoughts on Yom Kippur

Rabbi Bernie Fox

5781

Time to Get Serious – Really!

Always, a person should see oneself as half guilty and half meritorious. Perform one mitzvah and he should rejoice! He has tipped his scale to the side of merit. Perform one sin, woe to him! He has tipped his scale to guilt. [This is] as it says: And one sinner destroys much good. [This means that] because of a single sin much good is lost to him.

Ribbi Eleazar, the son of Ribbi Shimon, said: Because the world is judged according to its majority and the individual is judged according to his majority, [if] one does one mitzvah he should rejoice! He has tipped his scale and the scale of the world to the side of merit. He commits one sin, woe to him! For he has tipped his scale and the scale of the world to guilt. [This is] as it says: And one sinner destroys much good. [This means that] because of a single sin that this person performed, much good is lost from him and from the entire world. (Mesechet Kedushim 40a)

I. The process of judgment

In the above text, the Sages of the Talmud discuss the Divine judgment of the individual and the

community. They explain that the individual is judged by one's actions. If most of one's actions are good, one receives a positive judgment. If most of one's actions are wicked, one receives a negative judgment.¹ They add that a person should view one's actions as equally divided – merits in perfect balance with wicked actions or liabilities. One *mitzvah* will tip the scale and secure a positive judgment and one sin will result in a negative judgment.

The Sages add that the entire world is judged on the same basis. Therefore, a single *mitzvah* or sin can tip the scale for oneself and for the entire world.

A person whose iniquities are greater than his merits immediately [is condemned]² to death in his wickedness... Similarly, a country whose sins are greater [than its merits] is immediately [condemned to] annihilation... Similarly, the whole world, in its entirety, if their sins are greater [than their merits], they are immediately [condemned to] destruction. (Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 3:2)

¹ Rambam explains, "This assessment is not according to the number of merits and iniquities but according to their greatness. A merit may count against many iniquities... There is a sin that may count against many merits..." (Rambam, Hilchot Teshuvah 3:2) In other words, the number of sins and merits of a person does not determine one's judgment. The judgment process considers also, the seriousness of the sins and the greatness of one's meritorious deeds. Some sins and good deeds have lesser significance than others. Some have great significance and more impact on the verdict.

² Rambam writes that he dies immediately. However, this conflicts with many of his other statements. For example, Hilchot Teshuvah 7:6-7. There, Rambam describes the power of repentance to restore the sinner's relationship with Hashem. The sinner he describes is completely alienated from Hashem. Yet, he is given the opportunity to repent and restore his relationship with Hashem. To resolve this conflict, the words "is condemned" are added. The person is condemned to death but may earn reprieve through repentance.

II. The aggregated actions of the community

The commentaries disagree over the meaning of the Talmud's last statement. Rambam – Maimonides – position is presented above. He explains that like the individual, every country, and the entire world is judged based upon the cumulative actions of its members. When a community is judged – whether a country or the entire human community – the actions of all its members are aggregated and evaluated. The judgment of the community is determined by whether the aggregate is composed of mostly merits or mostly sins.

Based on this position, Rambam explains the Talmud very literally. A single action by a single individual can change the balance and determine the judgment that will be passed on the community.

III. A community of individuals

Rabbaynu Nissim presents an alternative interpretation of the Talmud's last statement. The community is judged based on its members. If most of its members are righteous, then the community receives a positive judgment. If most are wicked, then the community receives a negative judgment. One person, whose behaviors are perfectly balanced, can determine Hashem's judgment. If this person commits a sin and tips his scale toward guilt, he adds himself to the community's wicked and condemns the community. His *mitzvah* adds him to the community's righteous and saves the community.³

To illustrate the difference between these two interpretations, consider this situation. A community's judgment is in balance. A person who is among the righteous performs an additional *mitzvah* or a person among the wicked commits another sin. Will this *mitzvah* or sin impact the

verdict on the community? According to Rambam, it will. It adds to the aggregate *mitzvot* or sins of the community and it shifts the scales. According to RaN, the number of righteous or wicked members of the community has not changed. Hashem's judgment of the community is not impacted.

IV. The community serves its members

These two interpretations reflect different understandings of the relationship between the community and the individual. According to RaN, a community – a nation, or the entire world – is treated as a collection of individuals. The righteousness or wickedness of a community is determined by the character of its individual members. The community that promotes and nurtures righteous individuals has value. A community that harbors and encourages wicked individuals is worthless and its existence has no purpose.

V. The community as an organism

Rambam adopts a different view. His view is more difficult for us to recognize and accept because of the extraordinary importance we place upon the individual. But Rambam posits that the community is as significant as the individual. It is treated and judged as a single body. It is more than a collection of individuals. It is an entity of significance.

Rambam argues that a community is not judged based upon its individuals. It is judged as a unique organism. Does this community do good or evil? This is determined by the aggregated actions of its members.

Just as one's iniquities and merits are weighed at the moment of one's death, so too, each and every year, the iniquities and merits of every human being are weighed on the festival of Rosh

³ Rabbaynu Nissim ben Reuven, (RaN) *Notes to Commentary of Rabbaynu Yitzchak Alfasi*, Mesechet Rosh HaShanna 3a.

HaShanah. One who is found righteous receives a verdict of life and one who is found wicked receives a verdict of death. Those who are between [righteous and wicked] are suspended until Yom Kippur. If one performs teshuvah, one receives a verdict of life. If not, one receives a verdict of death. (Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 3:3)

VI. The urgency of Yom Kippur

The process of judgment is underway. Our individual destinies, and the destinies of our community and humanity are being decided in the coming days. This process took place a year ago. Many individuals were condemned to death or suffering. Nations were sentenced to devastation – economies are shattered, and political systems are stressed to the breaking point. The United States and Israel have not been spared. Hundreds of thousands have died, and we cannot yet measure the economic and political damage. Now, we are being judged again. We have an opportunity to earn salvation for ourselves, for our communities, perhaps, even for humanity. What greater motivation can there be for repentance!

Sins can be divided into two general categories. There are things we do that are wrong. But we do not realize that we are acting improperly. Every group or community can identify behaviors in other groups that deserve scrutiny and assessment. The more religious will point to the less scrupulous observance of those they deem less religious. Those who view themselves as members of more moderate religious movements will condemn the fanaticism of others. Each group is suspected of unknowingly acting improperly. Perhaps, the criticisms have some validity. However, because the sin is unknown to the sinner, he cannot repent from it. This type of analysis is not the most productive. It is not the starting point in *teshuvah*.

The starting point is to give our attention to the other category of sin. We need to look inward, and to seek out our own actions and behaviors that we know are sinful. Each of us can easily identify ways in which we can be more observant, and better people. These are obvious areas to focus upon. This is where a *teshuvah* movement must begin. It is time to become serious. We need things to become better and not to further degenerate. In the coming days, we have our best opportunity to end our suffering and the misery of so many. Please, let us seize the opportunity.

Send comments or questions to thoughtsonparasha@gmail.com.

Subscribe or unsubscribe at thoughtsonparasha@gmail.com.

To sponsor an edition of Thoughts, please contact thoughtsonparasha@gmail.com.

An extensive archive of past issues of *Thoughts* is available at the following site:

<https://www.ou.org/torah/parsha-series/rabbi-fox-on-parsha/#?>