



Dance Your Way into the Book of Life

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Throughout his groundbreaking sefer, *Oros HaTeshuvah*, Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook, zt"l, stresses the need for the return to a life of religious commitment and closeness with Hashem to be founded upon courage, confidence, and joyous certainty in our ability to successfully correct our past. Quoting Chazal's statement, "Ashrei mi she'oseh teshuva k'shehu ish, Fortunate is the one who does teshuva when he is yet a man (in his younger years)" (*Avodah Zara* 19a), Rav Kook makes a slight edit: "Ashrei mi shehu ish k'shehu oseh teshuva, Fortunate is the one who is a man when he does teshuva" – a Jew whose teshuva is saturated with strength and confidence in the power of this miraculous process.

We are quite familiar with the many reasons to tremble in fright when we consider the prospect of standing before Hashem in judgement. Well aware of our faults and shortcomings, of the shame and guilt we feel each year when the brilliant spotlight of Yom Kippur cuts through the obscurity of the *olam hasheker* to reveal our startling inadequacy, we hardly need to work on that aspect of the experience. However, because it is so important that we do teshuva with confidence and joy, I would like to outline two ideas from the *seforim hakedoshim* which may serve as pillars of strength and hope, thoughts which may enable us to balance the fear and trembling of the Yom HaDin with the strength and courage so central to the process.

He's in Our Place

In his magnum opus of unparalleled novelty, *Likutei Moharan*, (Tinyana 1) Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, zy"α, asks the following question. The Midrash (Shemos Rabba 30:9) teaches that, on some level, Hashem keeps His Torah and performs the mitzvos. This being so, the premise for Yom Kippur, an entire day devoted to judging the world, seems to be unfounded! Doesn't the Mishna clearly state, "Al tadin es chaveircha," one mustn't judge another? How then, can Hashem judge our nation on Yom Kippur?

Before exploring Rebbe Nachman's solution to this query, we must first resolve an apparent contradiction between this and another teaching in Pirkei Avos. The Mishna in Avos (1:6) states, "Hevei dan es kol adam l'kaf zechus, Judge each person favorably." However, the fourth Mishna in the second chapter states, "Al tadin es chaveircha ad shetagiya l'mekomo, Don't judge your fellow until you are standing in his place.

At first glance, these teachings seem to be incongruous. What is the final verdict? Should I judge others, or shouldn't I?

After some reflection, it becomes clear that these Mishnayos are indeed communicating complimentary points. Both teachings concur: "Hevei dan es kol adaim l'kaf zechus" – one must judge his fellow favorably. It is only when one seeks to judge his fellow in an unfavorable manner, that "Al tadin," it is better to reserve judgement entirely until one experiences what it is like to face that person's unique circumstances and challenges. Were this person to step inside his friend's shoes and see life from the other's perspective, he would surely be able to discern the redeeming factor in his actions and find ample reason to judge him favorably. Privy to the experiences, circumstances, struggles, and challenges of the other, he would see his decisions in a whole new light, approaching them with empathy and understanding instead of disgust and castigation.

To review, the statement of "Al tadin" is not absolute, for one is indeed allowed to judge, provided he does so in a favorable manner. Rather, the statement of "Al tadin" refers to a person who seeks to judge another with an unfavorable inclination and is thus marked with a condition – "ad shetagiya l'mekomo." If this condition were theoretically able to be fulfilled, and one were able to experience the consciousness, memories, thought process, inclination, and circumstances of the other, then he would indeed be able to judge because, founded upon a deep level of insight into the other person's perspective, we are certain he would judge him favorably.

After pointing out that the statement of "Al tadin" is contingent upon a condition which, if fulfilled, would indeed allow one to judge, Rebbe Nachman explains that this condition is, in fact, met by the Master of the world.

On two radically different occasions, seder night and in a house of mourning, we refer to Hashem as "HaMakom, The Place." The Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 68:9) explains that Hashem is the "Mekomo Shel Olam," the Space within which the universe exists; the grand Premise for all being. Hashem, as HaMakom, intimately experiences all levels of consciousness within His creation. This means that He is quite literally "in our shoes," more familiar with even the tiniest details of our life story than we ourselves could ever be. As such, Rebbe Nachman teaches that Hashem, HaMakom, is the only Being for Whom it is possible to perfectly fulfill the condition of "Ad shetagiya



I'mekomo, Don't judge your friend until you stand in his place." Since, as the *Mekomo Shel Olam*, Hashem does indeed stand in our place, He alone is able to judge us on Yom Kippur. Understanding us better than anyone on the planet, He is certain to judge us in the most favorable manner, in a way of empathy and endless Mercy.

This idea is a tremendous *chizuk*. Personally, I know that were I to be judged based on my actions alone, with only external appearances taken into account, I would have no hope. Fortunately, however, this is not at all the case. Here, Rebbe Nachman is teaching our generation that Hashem understands us in the deepest possible way. He has been with us from the very beginning and, as we shall see in the following point, recalls the exact circumstances that drove us to sin – not out of rebellion, but out of desperation. Intimately familiar with the myriad difficulties hardwired into the human condition, Hashem responds to our plea, "*Zachor ki afar anachnu*, Remember that we are dust," with empathy and understanding. Standing in our place and feeling our brokenness and pain, when Hashem judges us, He judges us favorably.

The First Sin

Throughout the *yomim nora'im* davening, we proclaim that Hashem is "*ma'avir rishon, rishon*," One Who removes the "first sin." Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchov (*Kedushas Levi, D'rush L'Rosh Hashana, "Oh yevuar ma'amar*," see also Sichos HaRan 89) explains this *middah* with the following, fascinating idea.

The Mishnah in Avos (4:2) states that one sin leads to another. Echoing this sentiment, the Gemara teaches, "Once one has sinned repeatedly, he begins to consider it as if this action is permitted" (*Arachin* 30b). In the same way that Adam and Chava's eating from the *Eitz HaDa'as* set a precedent for global sin and the *Cheit Ha'Egel* set a precedent for national sin, there is a moment in each of our lives which paved the way for deviance from the path of innocence, holiness, and embodiment of the Torah's ideals. According to the rule of "*aveirah goreres aveirah*," all subsequent sins can be traced back to this initial wrong turn, the "first sin." As we have seen in the previous section, Hashem shares in all of our life experiences, having been present "in our place" at every age and stage. As such, He knows the true nature of that initial sin, well aware that rebellion and wickedness played no role in a motive which was instead composed of curiosity in some cases and anxiety in others – natural feelings in the suffocating confusion of the adolescent years. With His perspective of infinite breadth and depth, Hashem is able to track all of our negative behaviors to the very first sin which, having been performed in a state of youthful exploration, is really not much of a sin at all. As such, it is easy for Hashem to judge us favorably and remove the initial sin. When He does, all of the other sins of the succeeding years, now seen as mere outgrowths of that initial misstep, fade away on their own. They are left without a foundation, without any base upon which to stand.

This, explains the holy Berditchover, is the explanation of "*ma'avir rishon rishon*." Hashem needn't examine each and every individual sin to evaluate whether or not to forgive us for it. Rather, "*ma'avir rishon rishon*," He simply removes the first link in the chain and the rest of our sins fall like a house of cards. Revealed as having been the outgrowth of innocence or natural human compulsion – the element of earth within which so strongly influences our decisions – those sins are seen in a completely different light. They are not what we truly want. They were never what we truly wanted. We are able to shake off the dust and express our true yearning for renewal, for a life that is truly called "life" – a life full of meaning, passion, fulfillment, and the relationship with Hashem wherein all of these things may be found.

Dancing into the Book of Life

I would like to close with the following story, a favorite of R' Shlomo Carlebach, z"l.

In the time of the Chozeh M'Lublin, there was a Jew in the city who was vocally opposed to the chassidic path of avodas Hashem. One Yom Kippur, due to unavoidable circumstances, this person was unable to make it to the shul in which he was accustomed to davening and was forced to spend the Yom Hadin among the chassidim in the court of the great Seer of Lublin.

Needles to say, the man suffered through what he perceived to be a strange and newfangled davening. Still, frustrated as he was by the spirited singing and strange shouts from the crowd, the man tried to contain his feelings for the sake of peace. He rolled his eyes and shook his head, but he kept his complaints to himself.

Toward the end of the davening, the chassidim began to dance with tremendous joy. Whirling round and around in circles, the chassidim stomped to a jubilant beat with ecstatic gesticulations, eyes ablaze. Although he had remained silent until this point, this was already too much for the visitor. "Dancing on Yom Kippur?!" he thought. "Who ever heard of such blasphemy?" Angrily, he stomped over to the Chozeh and shouted at him above the din.

"What is going on here? How can you stand by as your chassidim profane the holiness of Yom Kippur and the awe and dread we ought to feel by dancing with joy?"

Looking intently into his eyes, the Chozeh took this Jew by the arm and walked him to a quiet corner. Swiftly, and without uttering a word, the Chozeh covered the man's eyes with his hand. When he took his hand away, it was wet with tears.

"What did you see?" asked the Chozeh in a whisper.

"I saw that it is yet undecided whether I will be written in the Book of Life or the Book of Death." "And those who are dancing?" "Those who are dancing have already been written down in the book of life."

I want to take this opportunity to wish all of am Yisrael a *kesiva v'chasima tovah & ah gut gebentsht yohr*. May we merit to enter the *yomim nora'im* with the proper balance between awe and confident joy and dance our way into the book of life, health, *parnassah tovah*, *nachas*, *shidduchim*, meaning, fulfillment, and all kinds of success *b'ruchniyus uv'gashmiyus*. 🙏