



Revealing the inner beauty of the Torah in a way that touches and inspires the Jewish soul

THE BA'AL TESHUVA

B.S.D.

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The days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are called the "10 Days of Teshuva." Teshuva literally means "return," for it is during this time that we perform great acts of introspection, examining the direction of our life -- and mapping a plan for improvement.

Who is the ba'al teshuva -- one who examines one's life and behavior to improve one's character through Jewish philosophy? What moved him to undergo the rigorous and uncompromising process of teshuva -- a return to one's essential self? What was his psychological makeup while sunk in the seemingly endless abyss of his former life, and what is it now? What is the nature of the struggle that ensued in recasting the human personality?

The process of teshuva -- is at once astoundingly comprehensive and yet minutely detailed. It presupposes a certain kinds of awareness, a state of restless and disturbed sensitivities, sentiments which for the most part are alien to the non-acquainted Jew.

Let us consider a successful professional -- a physician, an attorney, an academic -- or any intelligent, thinking person. His livelihood depends upon reasoned thought and his many concerns are subject to rational considerations and decisions. Less important matters are allocated less time and thought; more important ones, proportionately greater amounts of both. And when it comes to all-important concerns and decisions, those upon which hinge life and death, with these he is unstinting in availing himself of every resource at his command; for should he fail in this regard, all his resources -- time, wealth, well-being, life itself -- will amount to nothing.

Is it not then wondrously paradoxical that for his limited, finite existence in this world he will give his all, yet remain largely unconcerned and unperturbed about the underlying meaning of this existence and the eternity that lies beyond? Oh, to be sure, these matters are not totally ignored, and perhaps considerable time may even be spent in contemplating them; but are they subjected to the same rigorous scrutiny he applies to his present welfare, to his field of expertise, to his life's hopes and ambitions?

Strangely enough, no. What the scientist would contemptuously reject as altogether inadequate in his minuscule, ephemeral laboratory, he will only too readily accept as sufficient in the macrocosmic laboratory of universal concern. The structure he lives in is made of marble and stone, while its foundation rests on tinsel and straw. Inevitably, such a structure is destined to collapse; it is merely a question of time. And herein lie the seeds of hope.

OPENED EYES

Every mortal craves the antithesis of his mortality, although he may consciously deny its existence. Against the test of time and ultimate purpose, life in this world, however rich and rewarding, pales appallingly into insignificance. And there are moments in every intelligent life -- at the nadir of sorrow and the pinnacle of success, and in between -- when these truths hit home, forcefully, incontrovertibly, if but for a brief and fleeting moment. One tends to recover quite quickly from these undoing, devastating thoughts and banish them to oblivion, until, at an unguarded moment, they surface once again.

There are two types of individuals: one will attribute these disquieting intrusions to a passing weakness and seek to



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insulate himself from them; the other will confess in his heart of hearts, however wrenching such a confession may be, that these thoughts are neither destructive nor signs of weakness -- that they may well be the most constructive thoughts he has ever entertained.

And indeed, so they are, for they will shed light to dispel the pall of darkness. For there is little difference in his ability to see between a man who walks in pitch darkness and one who willingly shuts his eyes, except that the latter may decide to open them, allowing steadying illumination to filter in. Now may begin the process of teshuva.

There is no such thing as a man who truly seeks but is unable to discover the object of his search. The Torah assures us with certainty, that one who honestly seeks truth will be able to uncover it. Regardless of how distant and estranged a Jew may be -- even though he himself has fashioned and glorified his own form of false worship, yet teshuva -- literally, return -- is as close by as his desire to seek it.

The tentative beginnings of this movement to return -- the felt need to draw closer to the absolute and to stand on terra-firma; the half-conscious expressed desire to take the initial step despite a wavering resolve which desperately seeks the strength of conviction to venture forth with a firm and resolute step; the diffidence and embarrassment and the imprecise knowledge of just how to approach the formidable ethos of Torah and mitzvot, at once overwhelming and yet reassuring -- all these sensibilities rise and fall like troubled waves in the restless soul of the one who contemplates teshuva.

MISSING THE MARK

There are three components of teshuva:

1. Acknowledgment and confession before God of one's past actions
2. Remorse for one's past actions and
3. Future resolve not to repeat the actions.

Which is hardest to come by for our present would-be ba'al teshuva? Repentance? No, not at all; once he comes to realize the futility of his situation, his whole-hearted regret is a natural consequence. Resolve for the future? Emphatically not. He may hesitate and procrastinate, waver to and fro countless times, but once he makes his commitment it is firm and resolute.

There is but one element left, the initial one: the acknowledgment that I have transgressed; I am in the wrong; I stand corrected -- in essence, I have failed. For all my outward appearance of success, for all my appearance of well-adjustment and stability, for all the respect accorded me -- the bitter and abject truth is -- I must change; for if I do not, all is lost.

This single confession -- that all is not well -- is what wrenches the psyche of this ba'al teshuva. It is that element of introspection to which he is unwilling to subject himself; the admission he is loath to make; the sinking of the head to the breast with the emission of the near-inaudible sigh, "It is true, I have missed the mark!" This does not come easily. It is painful; it is heart-rending. It must be prayed for, supplicated for: "Help me, give me the courage, accept my confession!"

For the first time in many years -- possibly the first time ever -- the ba'al teshuva enters into conversation with the Master of the World. Previously, in some general but undefined way, he may have been aware of His existence; but not until now does he experience the closeness that allows him the ability to address God directly.

There is a world of difference between the philosophical cognizance that God exists and the immediacy felt in one's entire being, that moves him to prayer. The uncompromising effort of the truth-seeker has crystallized the vague into the definite, transformed detached awareness into a permeating reality. The turmoil within has quieted, and in its place a soothing calm such as he has never before known settles over the ba'al teshuva. At last he is one with himself, one with



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his Divine Maker. Disparate elements of his life now coalesce into a meaningful whole.

No longer are his ambitions, his needs, and his metaphysical disposition unrelated personality reflections, but expressions of one underlying ideology, his relationship with God. The research of the scientist, the applied knowledge of the physician, the livelihood of the family breadwinner, all take on a greater, profounder significance, as they now serve not only one's self-interest and that of his fellow man, but transcend the temporal in drawing man closer to the One Who endowed man and the universe with purpose...