

Near the beginning of our *Parashah*, we read of the *Ben Sorer U'moreh* / the rebellious son who steals from his parents and is put to death because the Torah foresees that his future is to become a highwayman. Near the end of our *Parashah*, we are commanded regarding honest weights and measures. R' Yaakov Yosef z"l (1840-1902; *Rosh Yeshiva*, rabbi, and *Maggid* / preacher in Lithuania; first and only Chief Rabbi of New York City) notes that King Shlomo relates these two *Mitzvot* to each other; specifically, he writes (*Mishlei* 20:10-11): "False weights and false measures, both are an abomination to *Hashem*. A child may be dissembling in his behavior, even though his actions are blameless and proper." [At present, his actions are relatively blameless.] R' Yosef explains:

The *Gemara* (*Bava Batra* 89a) teaches that, not only is it forbidden for a merchant to use false weights and measures, it even is forbidden to possess such items. From this, R' Yosef writes, we can learn that, not only should one not practice bad character traits, one should not even possess such traits, even if he never displays them to others. Rather, one should work to uproot bad character traits entirely.

A *Ben Sorer U'moreh*, R' Yosef continues, is an example of someone who has bad character traits deep within himself. He has not killed anyone yet, but the Torah foresees that inevitably he will. Similarly, anyone who possesses bad character traits is liable to use them at some point. Therefore, it is not sufficient to suppress them; rather, one must work to uproot them.

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Teshuvah: An Act of Renewal

During the upcoming days of *Selichos* and, after that, during the High Holidays, we will repeatedly recite the verse (*Eichah* 5:21), "Bring us back to You, *Hashem*, and we shall return; renew our days as of old." (We recite this verse throughout the year, as well, anytime the Torah is returned to the *Aron Kodesh*.) What is the meaning of the expression, "Renew our days as of old"? It would seem that this phrase is inherently contradictory--either a person who returns to *Hashem* is renewing himself, turning over a new leaf, or he is returning to the ways of old!

R' Avraham Weinroth *shlita* (Israel) explains: R' Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev z"l (1740-1809; early *Chassidic Rebbe*) teaches that man's ability to repent hangs on his belief that he is created anew at every moment. We read (*Devarim* 10:12), "Now, *Yisrael*, what does *Hashem*, your *Elokim*, ask of you?" *Midrash Rabbah* comments: "'Now' refers to *Teshuvah*." How so? Because, explains R' Weinroth, only when a person believes that he is being recreated "now" can he repent. In this light, he continues, we can understand the phrase, "Renew our days as of old." How can we return to You, *Hashem*? Because you will renew us, recreate us, just as You created us "new" in the days of old.

Why is this belief so important to *Teshuvah*? *Teshuvah* itself is illogical. How can a person repent if he committed a sin that cannot be undone? The answer is that the sinful action can never be undone, but the sinful desire that led to that action can be undone by becoming a "new person" who never possessed that desire, R' Weinroth explains.

Our Sages teach, "One sin leads to another sin." R' Weinroth explains that this is the consequence of not seeing oneself as a being who is recreated constantly. If I see myself as a person who sinned, and who is mired in sin, I will inevitably sin again. However, if a person is determined to renew himself, to escape this cycle, he can return.

(*L'ohr Kedushat Levi* p.277)

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“When you build a new house, you shall make a fence for your roof, so that you will not place blood in your house if a fallen one falls from it.” (22:8)

R' Naftali Zvi Horowitz z"l (1760–1827; *Chassidic Rebbe* of Ropshitz, Galicia) writes: We pray, “Build it [the *Bet Hamikdash*] soon *B'yameinu*,” literally, “in our days.” “*B'yameinu*” also can be translated, “Using our days.” With what does *Hashem* build the *Bet Hamikdash*? With “our days,” *i.e.*, with the *Mitzvot* that a person performs every day. Some days, a person may, so-to-speak, add an entire row of bricks to the future *Bet Hamikdash*, while, other days, he may add only a brick or two. Indeed, writes the *Ropshitzer Rebbe*: “I heard from the holy rabbi R' Elimelech z"l [of Lizhensk; died 1787], that his soul ascended to Heaven and he saw angels carrying vessels of the *Bet Hamikdash*, and they told him that those were vessels that he had liberated from exile through his Divine service.”

The *Ropshitzer Rebbe* continues: In this vein, we may understand our verse allegorically [in addition to its literal meaning, *i.e.*, that one is commanded to build a fence around his roof or porch from which someone could fall]. “When you build a new house”--when you perform good deeds that will help to build a new house, a new *Bet Hamikdash*, “you shall make a fence”--you shall conceal your good deeds to the extent possible, serving *Hashem* with discretion and humility, and keeping your *Mitzvot* to yourself as much as possible, “lest a fallen one falls from it”--because one who is not sufficiently devoted to *Hashem* will experience a spiritual downfall from publicizing his service of *Hashem*. (Zera Kodesh)

“For but a brief moment I have forsaken you . . .” (From the Haftarah--Yeshayah 54:7)

Has our long exile really lasted only a brief moment? R' Yitzchak Arieli z"l (1896-1974; *Mashgiach* of Yeshivat Merkaz Harav) explains: Our Sages teach that the ultimate redemption was created before the world was created, meaning that the world was created for the sake of its ultimate fulfillment. Further, we say in our prayers that *Hashem* renews the world constantly. It follows, that the ultimate redemption is constantly being recreated as well. As such, it can occur at any moment, and the exile before the final redemption is but a moment long.

(*Haggadah Shel Pesach Shirat Ha'geulah* p.8)

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Logic would dictate that man should be judged based on his character traits--for example, that a rich man who steals due to greed should be punished more harshly than a poor man who steals due to hunger. However, that is not the *Halachah*. In the eyes of a human court, all theft is equal, and likewise other wrongful deeds, no matter who commits them.

In contrast, in the *Rosh Hashanah* prayers, we refer to *Hashem* as “the One Who understands all of man’s deeds.” We do not say, “Who sees,” but rather, “Who understands all of man’s deeds.” *Hashem* alone can judge the thoughts that lead to wrongful deeds, though they cannot be seen. He, alone, can “understand” man’s deeds and judge them fully. Likewise, only *Hashem* can, and does, judge man’s character. Of *Hashem* we say (*Tehilim* 36:7), “Your judgment is like the depths.” (L’vet Yaakov: Drush 15)

“If a bird’s nest happens to be before you on the road, on any tree or on the ground -- young birds or eggs -- and the mother is roosting on the young birds or the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young. You shall surely send away the mother . . .” (22:6-7)

The *Mishnah* (*Berachot* 5:3) states: “If one prays, ‘May Your mercy extend to us as it extends to a bird’s nest,’ we silence him.” The *Gemara* (33b) explains that one who prays thus is presuming to know the reasons for *Hashem*’s commandments when, in fact, they are decrees.

R' Yom Tov Lipmann Heller z"l (Bohemia; 1579-1654) writes in his commentary on the *Mishnah*, *Tosafot Yom Tov*, that the *Gemara*’s objection to assigning reasons to *Mitzvot* applies only in the context of prayer, where one speaks as if he definitively knows the reasons for the commandments. However, in the context of Torah study, one is permitted to speculate about the reasons for *Mitzvot*.

R' Meshulam Roth z"l (1875-1962; rabbi of Czernowitz, Romania; later, member of Israel’s Chief Rabbinate Council) writes that support for the words of the *Tosafot Yom Tov* may be found in the following *Gemara* (*Bava Batra* 82a): If one is uncertain whether he is obligated to bring *Bikkurim* / First Fruits, he may not read the verses that are usually read when bringing that offering (*Devarim* 26:5-10). Why not? asks the *Gemara*. He is merely reading verses from the Torah! Nevertheless, answers the *Gemara*, it appears as if he is telling a lie if he says he is bringing *Bikkurim* when these fruits may not have that status. In contrast, if one is merely studying those verses in the Torah, it does not appear to be a lie because there is no pretense of bringing *Bikkurim* at that moment. [Until here from the *Gemara*, with *Rashi*’s commentary] Similarly, R' Roth writes, if one prays, “May Your mercy extend to us as it extends to a bird’s nest,” he is making a definitive statement about the reason for the *Mitzvah* which may not be correct. That is not appropriate, unlike speaking about it in the context of Torah study.

R' Roth continues: In fact, R' Moshe ben Maimon z"l (*Rambam*; 1135-1204; Spain and Egypt) does write in *Moreh Nevochim* that the reason for the *Mitzvah* of sending away the mother bird is that *Hashem* has compassion on all of His creations. At first glance, this contradicts the *Mishnah* quoted above. But, in light of the above *Tosafot Yom Tov*, *Rambam*’s explanation may be understood.

One could ask, however: If *Hashem* wants to have compassion on birds, why does He need our help? Surely, *Hashem* has an infinite number of ways to accomplish His goals. R' Roth answers: Of course, *Hashem* does not need our help. Rather, He wishes to give us opportunities to share in His work so that we can be rewarded.

(*She'eilot U'teshuvot Kol Mevaser: Kuntreis Simchat Yom Tov*)