

Please watch for our Yom Kippur issue!

R' Moshe ben Maimon z"l (*Rambam*; 1135-1204; Spain and Egypt) writes: Every person can direct himself toward a good path and be a *Tzaddik* or direct himself toward a bad path and be a *Rasha*. This is the meaning of the verse (*Bereishit* 3:22), "Behold Man has become like the Unique One among us, knowing good and bad"--Man is the only creation that knows right from wrong and can choose freely among them. There is no other creature with that ability.

*Rambam* continues: Do not be influenced by the fools who make up the majority of the world, who say that *Hashem* decrees upon a person when he is formed whether he will be a *Tzaddik* or *Rasha*. It is not so! Rather, every person can be righteous like Moshe Rabbeinu or wicked like Yeravam (a king of *Yisrael* who, say our Sages, forfeited his share in the World-to-Come), merciful or cruel, generous or miserly, etc. No one can force a person to be one or the other, as the prophet Yirmiyah said (*Eichah* 3:38), "It is not from the mouth of the Most High that evil and good emanate." (*Mishneh Torah: Hil. Teshuvah*, ch.5)

R' Avraham Halevi Schorr *shlita* (Brooklyn, N.Y.) writes: The above statements are basic principles of our *Emunah* / faith. As such, many have wondered why *Rambam* placed them in the section of his work on the laws of *Teshuvah* rather than in the section entitled "Fundamentals of the Torah."

It appears, writes R' Schorr, that *Rambam* is speaking to each of us. Particularly in our era, when denial of Free Will is rampant, and we are told, instead, that people's behavior is pre-determined, it is crucial that we understand that it is we who make choices. Without that knowledge, we cannot regret our sins or admit that we have no excuses. That, in turn, would make *Teshuvah* impossible. (*Ha'lekach Ve'ha'libuv* 5771)

## Shabbat Shuvah

This Shabbat takes its name from the first word of the Haftarah (*Hoshea* 14:2), "Shuvah" / "Return." Nevertheless, commentaries find other allusions in the name.

R' Shlomo Hakohen Rabinowitz z"l (rabbi and *chassidic rebbe* of Radomsko, Poland; died 1866) writes: The first *Shabbat* after *Rosh Hashanah* is called "*Shabbat Shuvah*" because it was the first day of Adam Ha'Rishon's repentance for eating from the *Etz Ha'da'at*. That sin was committed on *Rosh Hashanah*--Friday, the very day Adam was created--and *Shabbat* protected him from a harsher punishment. Thus, says a *Midrash*, Adam proclaimed (*Tehilim* 92:1, 5), "A psalm for the Sabbath day . . . For you have gladdened me, *Hashem*, with Your deeds; at the work of Your Hands I sing glad song." Adam rejoiced because he understood that the damage he had done though his sin would be repaired at some future time. This recognition came about on *Shabbat* because the Attribute of Justice is "sweetened" (*i.e.*, softened) on *Shabbat*. And, as an encouraging sign for Adam, our Sages say that light prevailed all of that first *Shabbat Shuvah*, even at night.

This is relevant to us, as well. All of our Divine service is directed at repairing the spiritual damage that Adam caused through his sin, the *Radomsker Rebbe* explains. The Patriarchs, Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, began that process, but it is up to us to complete it [through our Torah study and *Mitzvot*]. Only when that task is completed will *Mashiach* come. This, the *Radomsker Rebbe* writes, is the meaning of the verse (*Chavakuk* 3:2), "*Hashem*--Your handiwork, during those years, give it life." Adam was the handiwork of *Hashem*. We, during all the ensuing years, work to breathe new life into the world Adam damaged. This is alluded to, as well, in the verse (*Vayikra* 18:5), "You shall observe My decrees and My laws, which *Adam* / man shall carry out and by which he shall live."

(*Tiferet Shlomo: Shabbat Shuvah*)

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## From the Haftarah . . .

**“Whoever is wise will understand these [admonitions], a discerning person will know them; the ways of Hashem are Yesharim/ just. Tzaddikim / the righteous shall walk in them, but Posh'im / intentional sinners will stumble on them.” (Hoshea 14:10)**

R' Eliyahu E. Dessler z"l (1892-1953; head of the Gateshead Kollel and *Mashgiach Ruchani* of the Ponovezh Yeshiva in Bnei Brak) writes:

“The ways of Hashem” means “Hashem’s acts to the extent that we are able to comprehend them.” Everything we perceive in our surroundings, be it intellectual or sensory, is an agent of Hashem to teach us a lesson that can further our spiritual growth--a gift to us from Him that is meant to teach us a truth.

R' Dessler continues: Hashem’s ways are “Yesharim” (literally, “straight”). When a person asks for directions to a destination and is told to “go straight,” the implication is that there are no confusing crossroads where he could mistakenly take a wrong turn. Such are Hashem’s ways.

“The righteous shall walk in them”--The righteous use all of the intellectual and sensory input they receive from the world as signposts that point them toward spiritual growth.

But if Hashem’s ways are “straight,” however, how is it possible to stumble on them, as our verse concludes?

R' Dessler answers: “Posh'im” are intentional sinners, those who, using their *Bechirah* / Free Will, make a conscious choice to depart from the “straight” road. They are given the same tools for living as are *Tzaddikim*, the very same “ways of Hashem” in which the righteous walk, but they “stumble” on them. They choose to learn false lessons, instead of true ones, from the intellectual and sensory input Hashem sends them.

In reality, R' Dessler writes, one cannot stumble on a “straight” path. Rather, the stumbling block of which our verse speaks is a person’s choice to twist the messages Hashem sends him in order to justify sin.

Most people are neither *Tzaddikim* nor *Posh'im*, but *Beinonim* (i.e., in the middle). R' Eliyahu z"l (1720-1797; the *Vilna Gaon*) observes that spiritually, we are never stationary; a *Beinoni* is, at all times, either on an upward path or a downward one. Anyone who thinks he is standing still is gravely mistaken, R' Dessler writes. While a person generally senses when he is growing spiritually, he usually does not sense when he is slipping. In particular, he does not sense the conscious bad choices he makes because those choices have become habits. What a person “always does” begins to seem “permitted,” R' Dessler explains. If we are honest, however, we would acknowledge that we are, in fact, *Posh'im* in many respects.

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**“Ask your father and he will relate it to you, your elders and they will tell you.” (32:7)**

The *Gemara* (*Shabbat* 23a) asks how we can recite the blessing, “Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to light a *Chanukah* light,” when *Chanukah* is a *Mitzvah* of rabbinic origin! Where did Hashem command us to light *Chanukah* lights?

The *Gemara* offers two answers: The Sage Rav Avia says that the commandment is found in the verse (*Devarim* 17:11), “You shall not deviate from the word that they [the Sages] will tell you.” The Sage Rav Nachman says it is found in our verse, “Ask your father and he will relate it to you, and your elders and they will tell you.” [Until here from the *Gemara*]

What is the basis for Rav Avia’s and Rav Nachman’s disagreement? Rabbeinu Nissim ben Reuven Gerondi z"l (“*Ran*”; Spain; 1320-1376) explains: There is no dispute that the verse Rav Avia quotes is the source of the Sages’ authority to enact decrees that distance us from sin. Thus, for example, our Sages added to the activities that are prohibited on *Shabbat* to make it less likely that we will transgress a Torah prohibition.

According to Rav Avia, this same authority allows the Sages to create completely new *Mitzvot*--for example, *Chanukah*. Rav Nachman, in contrast, understands that the verse, “You shall not deviate . . .,” refers only to those rabbinic decrees that are designed to strengthen Torah commandments, not to rabbinic enactments that are unrelated to a Torah commandment. This, Rav Nachman would maintain (says the *Ran*) is apparent from the context of the verse, “You shall not deviate,” for the passage begins (17:8), “If a matter of judgment [i.e., Torah law] is hidden from you.” Thus, according to Rav Nachman, another verse (i.e., our verse) is needed to teach that the Sages can enact a new *Mitzvah*, such as *Chanukah*. (*Derashot Ha'Ran* 5b)

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What practical steps can a person take to escape the status of *Poshe'a* (singular of *Posh'im*)? R' Dessler answers: One should multiply his good deeds before he is tested with a difficult choice. Indeed, this is what *Bnei Yisrael* were committing to do when they said, “*Na'aseh Ve'nishmah*” / “We will do, and [then] we will hear.” If good deeds become second nature to a person (and, writes R' Dessler, he combines those deeds with the study of *Mussar*) then he will make a good choice when he is confronted with a situation where he must use his *Bechirah*.

This, R' Dessler concludes, is the reason for eating only *Pas Yisrael* / Jewish-baked bread during the Ten Days of Repentance. Even if we will not observe this stringency long term, we increase our meritorious acts during this week to accustom ourselves to making better choices.

(*Michtav M'Eliyahu: Elul-Rosh Hashanah* p.16)