

Our *Parashah* opens: “*Ha’azinu* / Give ear, heavens, and I will speak; *Ve’tishma* / and may the earth hear the words of my mouth.” R’ Yissachar Shlomo Teichtel z”l *Hy”d* (1885-1945; rabbi and *Rosh Yeshiva* in Piešťany, Czechoslovakia) writes: The difference between the two types of listening referred to in our verse--*Ha’azana* and *Shemi’a*--is that the former refers to listening to something until one understands it very well, while the latter refers to hearing even without understanding. The “heavens”--*i.e.*, Torah scholars who busy themselves with heavenly matters--are called upon to study Torah until they understand it. And, says the second half of the verse, even those who will be unable to understand the Torah in depth because they are forced to busy themselves with earthly matters should listen to their rabbi’s Torah lessons.

What is the purpose of listening if one will not understand? The very next verse answers this question, R’ Teichtel writes. “May my teaching drop like the rain...” Raindrops have no idea why they are falling; they simply do G-d’s bidding, and the beneficial results follow automatically. So it is with Torah learning; even if one does not expect to understand, his soul benefits from being exposed to the Torah.

One might think, continues R’ Teichtel, that that result will occur only if the teacher is an extremely G-d-fearing, top-tier Torah scholar. No, continues the Torah, “When I call out the Name of *Hashem*, you [plural] ascribe greatness to our *Elokim*.” The plural pronoun teaches that the truth is beloved no matter from whom it comes. (*Mishneh Sachir*)

Teshuvah

“Return, *Yisrael*, to *Hashem*, your *Elokim*, for you have stumbled through your iniquity. Take words with you and return to *Hashem*; say to Him, ‘May You forgive every iniquity and take what is good, and let our lips substitute for [sacrificial offerings of] bulls.’” (From the *Haftarah--Hoshea 14:2*)

R’ Raphael Hakohen Hamburger z”l (1722-1803; rabbi of Altona-Hamburg-Wandsbeck) writes: Our Sages speak of two kinds of *Teshuvah*. One is *Teshuvah* motivated by fear of punishment, and the other is *Teshuvah* motivated by love of G-d. When one repents out of fear of punishment, say our Sages, he succeeds in downgrading his intentional sins to the level of unintentional sins, but he is not cleansed entirely. That is fitting, R’ Hamburger explains, as one whose *Teshuvah* is motivated by fear of punishment does not really care to erase his sin or its impact; he merely wants to avoid punishment. In contrast, say our Sages, when one repents because of his love of G-d, his intentional sins are treated as if they were *Mitzvot*. He sincerely regrets and is pained by his offense to G-d and the negative impacts that his sin had on the spiritual worlds above. Thus, he regrets that he ever sinned and wishes to erase his sin entirely.

This difference is reflected in our verse. “Return, *Yisrael*, to *Hashem*, your *Elokim*, for you have stumbled through your iniquity.” Stumbling implies an unintentional sin. Why are the sins of this penitent still counted as unintentional sins? Because they are “your iniquity,” *i.e.*, you care only about what the sin represents to you--namely, a source of punishment. The person here does not care what his sins mean to G-d.

That, continues our verse, is not the ideal *Teshuvah*. “Take words with you and return to *Hashem*; say to Him, ‘May You forgive every iniquity . . .’ Ask *Hashem* to erase every sin, because sins decrease His honor. This is *Teshuvah* out of love, despising all sin. If you do this, you will “take what is good,” says the verse, *i.e.*, your sins will be counted as *Mitzvot*.

(*Marpeh Lashon: Amud Ha’Yir’ah*)

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Teshuvah

R' Yosef Tzarfati z"l (Adrianople, Turkey; died 1639) writes: There are three reasons why, logically, *Teshuvah* should seemingly be ineffective. Corresponding to each of them, there is a reason why, nevertheless, *Hashem* does accept our *Teshuvah*.

(1) *Hashem* is infinite. Logically, then, the consequence for disobeying His command should be infinite. How can *Teshuvah* simply wipe out something so significant?

The answer is found in the verse (*Yeshayah* 1:18), "If your sins are like *Shanim* / scarlet they will become white as snow." "*Shanim*" can also mean "years." Indeed, if the prophet had meant the word to be taken literally, meaning only "scarlet," it would have been written "*Shani*," not "*Shanim*." Thus, *Hashem* is saying: I am infinite, but you live only a finite number of years. I will diminish your sins and make *Teshuvah* possible by weighing them using your measuring stick ("years"), not Mine ("infinity").

(2) *Hashem* is unchanging, as we read (*Bemidbar* 23:19), "G-d is not a human that He should change His mind." If we repent and *Hashem* forgives us and cancels His decree, haven't we, in effect, changed His mind?

The answer is that it is not *Hashem* Who has changed; it is the sinner. Indeed, when *Hashem* decrees a punishment, the decree itself is contingent upon the person remaining the same as he was when he sinned. If the person against whom the decree was made changes himself, it is as if the decree never existed. [See additional answers to this question below.]

(3) How can repentance undo what was done? If a murderer repents, for example, does that repentance bring the victim back?

The answer lies in the *Gemara* (*Sotah* 3a) which teaches, "A person does not sin unless a *Ruach Shtut* / spirit of imbecility enters him." When a person repents, he effectively says that he did not wish the sin to be done. He is like a toddler who kicked his mother while throwing a temper tantrum. (Since he is too small to reason with, there is no point in punishing him. Then, when he grows up, he realizes that he behaved inappropriately.) Likewise, one who commits a sin when a *Ruach Shtut* has entered him (so that he is not lucid) does not deserve to be punished.

(*Yad Yosef: Nitzavim, Drush Shenì*)

R' Eliyahu Hakohen z"l (1640-1729; Izmir, Turkey; prolific author) writes: It erroneously appears to us that *Hashem* has changed His mind when we repent because we view His first decree (*i.e.*, to punish us) and His second decree (*i.e.*, to accept our *Teshuvah* and not punish us) as two decrees being made in succession. In reality, however, there is only one decree: One who does good will be rewarded and one who sins will be punished. – **Continued in box on facing page** –

"They would provoke His jealousy with strangers . . ." (32:16)

R' Ze'ev Wolf Olesker z"l (1700-1777; Galicia and *Eretz Yisrael*) writes: This is a rebuke to students of Torah who interrupt their studies with idle chatter or to discuss current events, sometimes wiling away a full hour or two. (The idle chatter or discussion of current events is a "stranger" to the Torah study that is supposed to be taking place.)

R' Olesker continues, citing earlier works of *Mussar*: At first glance, such conversations merely violate a *Mitzvat Aseh* / affirmative commandment, specifically (*Devarim* 6:7), "You shall speak of them"--which the *Gemara* (*Yoma* 19b) understands as a *Mitzvah* to speak words of Torah and not other things. Violating a *Mitzvat Aseh* is the least stringent type of sin that exists. However, unlike more serious sins, such as stealing, the opportunity to commit this transgression arises every single day--indeed, multiple times every day. The frequency of this transgression converts it into a very serious sin. (*Derashot Ha'Razah*)

We read (*Mishlei* 17:27), "One who is sparing with his words knows knowledge, and a man of understanding speaks sparingly." R' Yehuda Loewe z"l (*Maharal* of Prague; died 1609) explains: King Shlomo, the author of *Mishlei*, is not advocating that a person sit silently as if he is mute. Indeed, a person is supposed to be sociable ("*Me'orav im ha'beriyot*"). Furthermore, a person often needs to speak to accomplish whatever he needs to get done. Nevertheless, King Shlomo is advocating that we speak sparingly when it is not necessary to speak. (*Netiv Ha'shetikah* ch.1)

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Alternatively, *Hashem* views a person who has repented as a new person. Any decrees made against the person he previously was were not made against him. Indeed, *Kabbalists* teach that a *Ba'al Teshuvah* may actually be given a new soul, such that he literally is a different person. (R' Eliyahu writes that this is what R' Yosef Tzarfati meant in point #2 above.)

Also, we read (*Eichah* 3:38), "It is not from the mouth of the Most High that evil and good emanate." Rather, it is we who determine our own future through our actions. Thus, when we repent, it is we who have changed our decree, not *Hashem*.

Lastly, writes R' Eliyahu, *Hashem* knows the future, so He knows if a person is destined to repent. If a person who sinned begins to experience a punishment and then he repents, we know retroactively that there never was a "bad" decree against the person. Whatever "punishment" he experienced was simply to motivate him to repent.

(*Chut Shel Chessed: Drush Le'teshuvah*)