**THE TESHUVA "REVOLUTION"**

**by Rav Asher Meir**

I. The Benefit of the Doubt

A fundamental character trait mandated in Judaism is always judging one's fellow man favorably - being "dan le-kaf zechut". According to many commentators, this is explicitly commanded in the Torah: "Judge your fellow righteously" (b'tzedek tishpot amitecha - Vayikra 19:15). It is also mentioned in Pirkei Avot (1:6): "Tilt the scales of judgment in every man's favor" (heve dan kol adam le-kaf zechut).

The obvious reason for this imperative is that if everybody were constantly suspicious of his neighbor's conduct, it would be simply impossible for society to exist. Everybody would be worrying more about how his actions will be interpreted, than about the appropriateness of the actions themselves. Enmity would be rife.

Practically, the main reason for judging meritoriously is the irreconcilable element of uncertainty. One cannot possibly know all the circumstances that motivated someone to act in a certain way, so it is appropriate to give him the benefit of the doubt. This explanation is supported by the halacha which permits judging unfavorably in cases where a positive judgment is most unlikely (see Chafetz Chayim 3:7).

II. If Not An Acquittal - At Least a Light Sentence

Our sages also talked about a step beyond "dan le-kaf zechut" called "sanegoria". We are bidden to plead the case even of someone who has clearly acted improperly. This is an active form of favorable judgment. We are to act as the "sanegor", the defense attorney, for the transgressor - commissioned to think up every possible claim, however farfetched, which could conceivably get our client "off the hook". This is described by Rav Moshe Chaim Luzatto in Mesillat Yesharim when he talks about the saint's responsibility to "defend" the actions of his generation before the Most High (end of chapter 19).

One reason for such pleading is to seek a merciful sentence from the Almighty Judge. This resembles Avraham's pleading on behalf of the residents of Sodom.

III. Changing the Effect by Altering the Cause

Some Hasidic literature emphasizes a further aspect of the "tikkun" or rectification implicit in positive judgment. Rav Nachman of Breslav says: "Even someone who seems (God forbid) to be completely wicked, we have to seek in him a little bit of goodness, one aspect of his being in which he is not wicked. And by virtue of this, that he finds in him some good and judges him favorably - he in fact elevates him to a favorable judgment, and can bring him to full repentance this way!" (Likutei Etzot, Tochecha p. 16).

This seems quite strange - how can we bring anyone else to full repentance? As a rule, one has not done "teshuva" until he fully recognizes his transgressions. Indeed, for this reason the Rema writes that a doubtful transgression is more serious than a certain one; since a person is not convinced that he acted improperly, he is unlikely to repent adequately (Orach Chaim 603:1). Yet Rav Nachman informs us that we bring about full repentance by mitigating the offender's transgressions in our own minds!

The simple "psychological" understanding of Rav Nachman's words is that a person has no incentive to repent if he is convinced that he has a wicked nature. "Teshuva" means "Returning," and therefore it may be appropriate only for a righteous person who lapsed and wants to "return" to his true self. By convincing the transgressor that he is not so bad after all, we give him the appropriate motivation for changing his behavior. But the emphasis of Rav Nachman is not on convincing the sinner - Rav Nachman stressed the need to convince ourselves! How is this supposed to elevate the actions of the wicked?

The answer to this question can be related to the solution of another puzzle. The past is irrevocable, so it should be impossible to change our past actions. Yet our sages inform us (Yoma 86b) that repentance can transform one's sins into merits. While we can understand that God will "wipe the slate clean" for someone who has sincerely repented, how can we say that God will transmute bad into good?

One possible answer is that the idea of "sin" or "merit" is not limited to the narrow calculus of whether the action is permissible or forbidden, but to the much larger question of whether it is ultimately a constructive or destructive act. This depends in part on our perception; the same act viewed as negative from one perspective may, from a different point of view, appear positive. And positive consequences of an act may far outweigh its direct destructive influences.

Part of positive judgment, and part of teshuva, involves the creation of a new outlook on past actions, as well as molding future behavior. Past misdeeds should be assimilated and reconciled until they are conceived as part of the process which led to the current state of loving God. Ideally, the new outlook not only accepts that "everything is for the good", but is also able to perceive that "good is in everything". (Arriving at such a perception may take considerable work. One reason Rav Kook considered sanegoria a branch of Torah learning (Orot Yisrael 4) must be because of the effort which one must invest in order to come up with a sophisticated, elegant reconciliation of the opposing sides.)

IV. The Teshuva Revolution

This reformulation of past actions is very similar to the "paradigm shift" which constitutes a scientific revolution: all of the same data which were previously awkwardly interpreted within an old theory, are suddenly integrated into a whole new understanding - one that is more consistent and appealing. To use the language of the philosophy of science, the sinner's past is "rationally reconstructed" in a way which more beautifully conforms with his conception of the Divine plan.

Notice that there is nothing in this process that limits it to the transgressor himself. On the contrary, the saintly person, who feels more closely the divine presence, has a much better perspective from which to "fit" the sinner's actions into God's blueprint for the world. His favorable judgment of his fellow man effectively "reframes" the sin as a constructive act. In this sense, the seeking of merit in one's fellow man can not only encourage his repentance - it can actually constitute one dimension of this "repentance", that is, the reframing of his past negative actions into a constructive mold.

This Yom Kippur, we should not only strive to make our future behavior better than our past. We should strive to "improve" our past behavior itself - not by excusing it, but by adopting a constructive attitude towards it, one in which our past circumstances are an integral part of the path which ultimately will lead us to our ideal selves.