YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Student summaries of sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat Vayelekh – Shabbat Shuva**

**Sicha of HarAV Baruch Gigi**

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**Dedicated in loving memory of Joel Chefitz z”l**

**by his nieces and nephews**

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**“Return, O Israel, to the Lord Your God”**

Summarized by David Oren

Translated by David Strauss

**The Difference Between Repentance and Prayer**

 "But as for me, let my prayer be to You, O Lord, in an acceptable time" (*Tehillim* 69:14). From this verse, which we recite in the Mincha service on Shabbat, the Midrash infers that there are certain times of favor when prayers are more likely to be accepted:

Rabbi Chanina bar Pappa asked Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman: What is the meaning of that which is written: "But as for me, let my prayer to You, O Lord, be in an acceptable time"? He said to him: The gates of prayer are sometimes open and sometimes closed, but the gates of repentance are always open.

He said to him: From where [do you derive this]? As it is written: "With wondrous works You answer us in righteousness, O God of our salvation; You, in whom all the ends of the earth, and the far distant seas, trust" (*Tehillim* 65:6). Just as a ritual bath is sometimes open and sometimes closed, so the gates of prayer are sometimes open and sometimes closed. But the sea is always open; so too the hand of the Holy One, blessed be He, is always open to receive penitents. (*Devarim Rabba* *Vaetchanan*, 12)

The Midrash infers that a prayer is answered only when it is offered during a time of favor, whereas repentance always merits a response. One occasion of favor for prayer that *Chazal* discuss is communal prayer; based on the verse, "Behold, God is mighty, yet He despises not any" (*Iyov* 36:5), *Chazal* say that God never rejects communal prayer (see *Berakhot* 8a). Another prayer we find that is answered, "in a time of favor," is that of the ten days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, as the prophet says: "Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near" (*Yeshayahu* 55:6).[[1]](#footnote-1)

In contrast to prayer, which is not necessarily accepted (unless, for instance, it is a communal prayer or is offered during the Ten Days of Repentance), the gates of repentance are always open, and God's hand is always stretched out to receive penitents. Why is this so? What is the difference between repentance and prayer?

The essence of prayer lies in its content: the person is in distress, perhaps about making a living, or health issues, or raising children, or work, and he pours out his soul before God.

Repentance, on the other hand, does not focus on the words and the content. Borrowing a phrase found in tractate *Me'ila* (18a),"*me'ila* (misuse of consecrated property) is purely a matter of change," we can say that "repentance is purely a matter of change." Repentance does not stem from a person's actions, and not even from his prayers, but rather from a single decision: "I wish to repent; I wish to *change* my behavior."

At that point, when a person decides to change direction and embark on a new path, God is waiting for him, and His hand is stretched out to receive him.

**Thoughts and Words of Repentance**

 This Shabbat, we will read in the *haftara*:

Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God; for you have stumbled in your iniquity. Take with you words, and return to the Lord; say to Him: Forgive all iniquity, and accept that which is good; so will we render for bulls [the offering of] our lips. (*Hoshea* 14:2-3)

Regarding these verses, the Gemara in tractate *Yoma* says as follows:

Come and see how different is the action of the Holy One, blessed be He, from the character of one of flesh and blood. As to the character of one of flesh and blood, if one angers his fellow, it is doubtful whether he [the latter] will be pacified by him or not. And even if you would say, he can be pacified, it is doubtful whether he will be pacified by mere words. But with the Holy One, blessed be He, if a man commits a sin in secret, He is pacified by mere words, as it is stated: "Take with you words, and return to the Lord." Still more: He even accounts it to him as a good deed, as it is stated: "And accept that which is good." Still more: Scripture accounts it to him as if he had offered up bulls, as it is stated: "So will we render for bulls [the offerings of] our lips." Perhaps you will say [the reference is to] obligatory bulls? Therefore, it is stated: "I will heal their backsliding; I will love them freely." (*Yoma* 86b)

What are those "words"? At the beginning of *Hilkhot Teshuva*, the Rambam writes that the essence of repentance is confession: "When a person repents, and returns from his sin, he must confess before God, blessed be He" (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 1:1). However, it should be noted that this is the practical essence of repentance. Indeed, there is no repentance without confession. But that confession, that practical part of repentance, must come after an inner change. After a person has already decided to change direction, after he has already "repented and returned from his sin," only then must he confess.

These stages of repentance also find expression in the above verses. First, a person must understand and feel that "you have stumbled in your iniquity" (*Hoshea* 14:2), and from there come to repentance. After that, he comes to the next stage, "take with you words, and return to the Lord" (14:3). God says to him: Now that you have taken the first step, the step of repentance, you need not do very much. There is no need for many actions, only "take with you words" – words alone, and through that, "return to the Lord."

What is the nature of those "words”? The Rambam in the beginning of *Hilkhot Teshuva* emphasizes the importance of a verbal confession. It is not enough to renounce the sin internally; one must give oral expression to that decision, through confession.

Thoughts of repentance that arise in one's heart and mind are not enough. Why?

As long as the person does not actualize his thoughts and give them verbal expression, they remain mere thoughts and have no meaning in the world of action. Only through confession does the idea of repentance gain true presence in our world. Of course, this is on condition that the confession in fact expresses the deep murmurings of his heart; otherwise, he just adds further sin to his original transgression, as we recite in our confession, "for the sin (*al chet*) that we committed through the [insincere] confession of our mouths," and as the prophet says: "For this people… with its mouth and lips it does honor Me, but it has removed its heart far from Me" (*Yeshayahu* 29:13).

**Confession of the Heart**

In life in general and regarding repentance in particular, we can identify three planes: thought, speech, and action. Ostensibly, an action should be required to atone for an act of sin, but God in His mercy makes do with "words" and does not require any action. This, however, in only on condition that the "words" in fact come from depths of the sinner's heart. *Then* Scripture accounts it to him as if he had offered up bulls on the Temple altar.

The importance of the heart's participation in the process appears in other places as well. Thus, the prophet Yeshayahu describes the type of fasting that does, or does not, please God:

Is such the fast that I choose? A day for a man to afflict his soul? Is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the Lord? Is not this the fast that I choose: to loosen the fetters of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to deal your bread to the hungry, and that you bring the poor that are cast out to your house? When you see the naked, that you cover him, and that you not hide yourself from your own flesh?... Then shall you call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and He will say: Here I am. (*Yeshayahu* 58:5-7, 9)

The words by way of which God is appeased come from the heart, from inner sincerity. When a person's mouth and heart are the same, when he says to God what his heart tells him, he paves the proper path to repentance.

Rav Kook expresses similar ideas in his own poetic language:

To the degree that a person recognizes his sins, the clarity of the light of repentance shines on his soul. Even though ostensibly he has not yet gained the permanence of repentance in his heart and will, nevertheless, its light hovers over him, and it is already working to turn him into a new creation. Even those things that hinder repentance, to the degree that the person recognizes them, and does not disregard their reality, their hindrance becomes less powerful and their virulence diminishes. From this the light of repentance begins to shine upon him, and the holiness of the supernal joy already clothes itself in the essence of his soul, and closed gates keep opening before him. In the end he comes to such a supreme level that all the coils straighten, "every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; and the rugged shall be made level, and the rough places a plain." (*Orot ha-Teshuva* 15, 7)

This is what *Chazal* meant when they described God’s words to Israel about repentance: "My children, open for Me one opening of repentance like the eye of the needle, and I will open for you openings through which wagons and carriages can enter " (*Shir ha-Shirim Rabba* 5:2).When there is a sincere start, one receives Divine aid. As the Torah states regarding repentance: “Then the Lord your God will turn your captivity… And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart" (*Devarim* 30:3, 6). The Ramban comments on this: “This is what *Chazal* said: ‘One who comes to purify himself is given Divine assistance’ – it assures you that you will return to Him with all your heart, and He will help you.”

**Judging Favorably**

 The need for change and transformation is not limited to the realm of our relationship with God – in Torah learning, in prayer, and in keeping His commandments – but also applies to our relationships with others. Here too, a fundamental change in point of view is required – in particular regarding our judgmental view of the actions of others.

Allow me to explain. I am not talking about a case where a person's action can easily be judged positively or negatively. In such a case, we must certainly judge him positively. This is included in the obligation to "judge every person favorably" (*Avot* 1:6). I am talking about a case where the action is almost certainly negative. Even in such a case, the person should be judged favorably (as explained in the Gemara in *Shabbat* 16b). This is the change required in our perspective on the actions of others.

But over and beyond the interpretation of what actually happened, there is another aspect here, of seeing the totality of things. When we see a person's action, we do not know all the factors that brought him to do what he did – the difficulties and troubles that he must contend with, and what led him to commit the sin. At this time of year, we mention the 13 attributes of Divine mercy many times. One of these attributes is *rachum*, merciful. What is the meaning of this attribute? A person turns to God and says to Him: “Indeed, I have sinned, transgressed, and committed iniquity before You. But, Master of the universe, there are extenuating circumstances. Here, I didn't feel well, and so I cancelled my Torah study. There, I was very tired, and so I didn't get up for morning prayers. When You judge me, O Master of the universe, look not only at the sins, but also at the tribulations.” This is the attribute of mercy.

This idea is well expressed in a famous story appearing in the Gemara in tractate *Bava Metzia*:

Some porters [negligently] broke a barrel of wine belonging to Rabba bar bar Chanan. Thereupon he seized their garments [as compensation]; so they went and complained to Rav. He said to him: Return their garments to them. [Rabba bar bar Chanan] said to him: Is that the law? He [Rav] said to him: Yes, "that you may walk in the way of good men" [*Mishlei* 2:20]. Their garments having been returned, they observed: We are poor men, have worked all day, and are in need: are we to get nothing? He said: Go and pay them. He said to him: Is that the law? He answered: Yes; "and keep the path of the righteous [ibid.]." (*Bava Metzia* 83a)

We will try to understand this story in light of Rav Yaakov Moshe Charlap's explanation. At first glance, Rabba bar bar Chanan seems to be right: The porters were paid bailees, responsible for the care of Rabba bar bar Chanan’s belongings, and paid bailees are exempt from liability only in cases of damage beyond their control. Here, the damage was not beyond their control, and therefore they should be liable.

All of this is certainly true on the dry legal level, and Rav certainly does not disagree with Rabba bar bar Chanan about the laws of *Choshen Mishpat.* In the realm of strict law, Rabba's question was in order: "Is that the law?"

But Rav answered him: That is indeed the law, because of the principle "that you may walk in the way of good men." How so? This phrase is reminiscent of another verse: "And you shall do that which is right and good" (*Devarim* 6:18), which Rashi and Ramban (ad loc.) understand to mean that one must act "beyond the letter of the law." Sometimes people think that "beyond the letter of the law" means bend the law: there is a law, and we deviate from it out of mercy. But this is a mistake! Going "beyond the letter of the law" means that we consider the situation in its entirety: the situation of the person being judged, and the factors that brought him to sin. Therefore, Rav says to Rabba bar bar Chanan: "You must go beyond the letter of the law, and understand the plight of the porters, and not take their garments away from them."

At the next stage, the porters turn to Rav once more and say to him: "We are poor, and have nothing to bring home to eat." Here, Rav explains Rabba's obligation to pay the workers based on the second half of the verse from *Mishlei*: "And keep the path of the righteous." Ostensibly, the phrase "the path of the righteous (*tzaddikim*)" refers to justice (*tzedek*) – the law – whereas we just said that he is calling on him to act beyond the letter of the law. Therefore, Rav Charlap explains that as soon as Rabba agreed to consider the situation in its totality, to relate to the porters with the attribute of mercy, that very attribute turns into justice. Now, it is **justice**, not **mercy,** that determines he must pay the porters their salary.

On Yom Kippur, we turn to God and say to Him: "We do not want You to bend the law for us. We want true justice. But at the same time, we want the attribute of mercy to administer that justice, that the law should consider more than just the specific act.” In order for us to make such a request of God, we ourselves must adopt this attribute, and judge others favorably, even when the strict law says that they are sinners. When we do this, we can appear before Him and ask for mercy in the law.

[This *sicha* was delivered on Shabbat *Parashat Vayelekh* 5780.]

1. It is further stated: "The Lord is near to all those who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth" (*Tehillim* 145:18) – God is close to all true calls. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)