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Yom Kippur – The Right of Return

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

We experience a flurry of emotions. On one hand, there is incredible excitement for the new year and new beginnings. Yet, we simultaneously experience feelings of anxiety and uncertainty, not knowing what the coming year will bring. We feel confident in our ability to accomplish incredible things; yet, we feel pain over the failures and missed opportunities of the past. How should we enter into this great and awesome day of *Yom Kippur*? What thoughts should occupy our racing minds and illuminated souls?

I would like to share with you a truly moving idea culled from the annals of *halachik* literature. There is an interesting sefer, titled "*Chukos HaGer*" which discusses many intricate and fascinating ideas and questions related to the complicated topic of conversion (I want to thank Rabbi JJ Schacter for sharing this responsa with me). Rabbi Moshe HaLevi Shteinberg (1909-1993) one of the premier experts on conversion dealt with the following situation (original responsa is attached below). A man walked into the *Beis Din* (religious court) and expressed his desire to convert. Upon inquiring about his background, this young man revealed that he was German and had been a Nazi soldier during the war and was involved in the round up and execution of Jews. The young man felt terrible remorse for his crimes, had repented for his sins and now wanted to convert and become a Jew. Rav Shteinberg was asked this most profound question, "Can we accept this man as part of our people after all he has done?"

Rav Shteinberg begins by looking at the question from multiple angles:

From a personal and national perspective, the answer must be a resounding "no." A person with so much Jewish blood on his hands has no place in the camp of Israel. He must be kept far away. How can we ever call him our brother after what he has done?

But Rav Shteinberg continues:

"However, from a strict legal perspective (*halacha yiveysha*), I can't see any reason to block his conversion (he then quotes a number of examples of wicked people who repented and either converted or had descendants who converted)... The gates of *Teshuva* are never closed and God never turns away the sincere penitent... Whoever, wants to enter these gates is given license to do so... Therefore, if the religious court feels that he is truly penitent and his motivations are pure... there is no reason to prevent him from joining the collective embrace of the Jewish people."

We learn about the power of *Teshuva*, we believe in the power of *Teshuva*, but we never truly comprehend the overwhelmingly cathartic nature of this great gift. Even the Nazi can return. This is of course the extreme, but we must understand the message. If the most barbaric, cruel and evil individual can access the power of *Teshuva*, there is no telling what we can accomplish.

We often think change is impossible. We assume that "who we are" is exactly "who we will be." But that need not be the case. If there are things within us which are broken, we can fix them. If there are parts of my life in a state of disrepair, there is an opportunity to address the deficiencies. If there are character traits which are holding me back, I hold the keys to a personalistic overhaul. Over the course of the year we do things to alienate ourselves from God and from our true selves. The gates of *Teshuva*, the gates of change, the gates of return to God and to ourselves are always open.

This is the power of Yom Kippur. Over the course of this sacred day we will pray for many things. We will pray for health, children, livelihood and life itself. We will pray for our personal and collective needs. But let us not forget the true purpose of this day: to return. The gates are open, and they will remain open no matter what we have or have not done. May we find the courage to enter and the strength to return.

I take this opportunity to wish you and your family a *Gmar Chasima Tova* and *ah gutten Shabbos*.

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ש א ל ה ג .

כת"ר ביקשני לחזור בענין נכרי, לשעבר חבר פעיל במפלגה הנאצית הידועה לשמצה ויש להניח שבעצמו השתתף במעשים נפשעים, וכעת חזר בתשובה ורוצה להחגייר – אם מקבלים אותו.

ת ש ו ב ה

אם לדון מבחינה אנושית בכלל ומבחינת הכבוד והרגש הלאומי בפרט, פשוט וברור שאין המצפון מרשה להודקק לו ולענות לבקשתו כחיוב. בר"ש כזה אשר ידיו דם יהודי מלאות אין מקומו במחנה ישראל, כי אם טמא טמא יקרא לו ומקומו הרחק מבית ישראל, ואיך קשה הדבר להכריז עליו: אחינו אתה. אבל מבחינת ההלכה היבשה אינני רואה כל מגיעה מלקבלו. הנה קין, הרוצה הראשון בתולדות האנושות, אמר לפי המדרש בב"ר פכ"ב עשיתי תשובה ונתלשתי, ועי' במד"ר שמות יט ד, אמר איוב בתוך לא ילין גר שאין הקב"ה פוסל לבריה אלא לכל הוא מקבלי השערים נפתחים בכל שעה, וכל מי שהוא מבקש ליכנס – יכנס, ועי' בשו"ת בשמים ראש המיוחס לרא"ש, שכתב בסי' קעז שמכל האומות מקבלים גרים ואפילו מורע עמלק, ועי' בש"ס גיטין נו ובסנהדרין צו, שמנירון הרשע יצא התנא רבי מאיר, ונבזראדן רב טבויים, אזורי שהרג ושפך רבבות יהודים החפים מכל פשע, עשה תשובה והתגייר, וחז"ל לא גרתעו לומר, נבזראדן גר צדק היה.

לכן אם ביח הדין משוכנע שהוא התחרט בחרטה גמורה, חזר בתשובה שלימה, מתאמץ בכנות להכנס תחת כנפי השכינה ולא מסתרת איזו כוונה של הנאה אישית או קבלת שררה – אין מצד ההלכה כל איסור לקבלו לחיק היהדות.