

Yizkor – Yom Kippur 5780: “Learning How to do Teshuva from Paroah”

[Intro:] We’ve now said *Ashamnu* 5 times and we have 6 more left – 2 in *Musaf*, 2 in *Mincha* and 2 in *Ne’ilah*.

-every time we introduce the Ashamnu’s by saying,

– שָׂאִין אֲנַחְנוּ עֵזִי פְּנִים וְקִשִּׁי עֶרְף לֹמֵר לְפָנֶיךָ ה' אֱלֹקֵינוּ וְאֵלֵךְ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ
צְדִיקִים אֲנַחְנוּ וְלֹא חָטָאנוּ - אֲבָל אֲנַחְנוּ וְאֲבוֹתֵינוּ חָטָאנוּ

*we are not so brazen as to say that we are righteous and have not sinned,
rather we and our parents are sinners.*

All of the parents who are sitting with your children – how do you feel about this?

My father is sitting right here. If were him, I’d be pretty peeved. It’s pretty rude, and It’s Yom Kippur no less! – I have a lot to do teshuva for, and here we are piling on violating Kibud Av V’eim! Why do we do that? Why do we say, “we and our parents are sinners”?

-Well... we’re quoting a pasuk in tehillim הָעֵוִינוּ הִרְשָׁעֵנוּ; עִם-אֲבוֹתֵינוּ – *we have sinned along with our fathers, we have acted wickedly and perversely*

But actually – what we are saying before ashamnu is worse, because we’re not saying we sinned with our fathers, like going out to play catch when you’re supposed to be cleaning the house; this is saying we sinned, and our fathers have

also sinned. אֲבָל אֲנַחְנוּ וְאֲבוֹתֵינוּ חָטָאנוּ

To find this formula's precedent in Tanach we find ourselves face to face with Paroah, of all people. Because, at the end of *Parshat Va'era*, after the plague of barad when 'fire encapsulated by ice' hailed down from the sky. Paroah reflects on the miraculous retribution and remorsefully admits – ה' הַצַּדִּיק, וְאֲנִי וְעַמִּי, – הַרְשָׁעִים – “I and my nation are the evil doers”.

But this statement of remorse seems to shirk some of the responsibility – almost as if Paroah is saying “ok, I’m going down, but my nation, Egyptians, you’re coming down with me.” ...If this is what we’re saying about our parents – that’s awful!

-To make things worse, Paroah introduces his admission of guilt, by saying –

חָטָאתִי הַפְּעַם

This time I sinned.... JUST THIS TIME?!

So we have 2 questions on Paroah's “teshuva”.

Question 1. Why does he say chatasi hapa'am? I sinned *this time*?

Question 2. Why does he drag his people into his statement of remorse?

R' Adin Steinsalz explains that Paroah is actually telling us something hugely important about the nature of remorse, and thus how to do teshuva well.

-Paroah was born as the heir to the throne in Egypt and raised as such. As a result, he was bound to think that he was a god, divine right – meaning divine and therefore right. He had never been wrong or forced to contemplate the virtue or lack thereof of his actions.

Answer 1: When Paroah says “Chatasi hapa’am” – he’s changing his mindset – he’s saying – “I used to think everything I do is ok. I’m so used to behaving the way that I do, so used to justifying my actions, and being so sure that what I’m doing is permissible.”

-We weren’t born into monarchy, but we also have very powerful abilities to rationalize what we do and convince ourselves that our basic religious approach is correct. How do we do that?

-I’d suggest there are (at least) 2 tools we use for our rationalization:

1. Yoma: the gemara Yoma says “if a person commits a sin and repeats it, it becomes to him as though it were permissible” – we’re creatures of habit and it’s uncomfortable to feel guilty, so we convince ourselves that the things we’re doing must be ok, because it’s more comfortable than the alternative
2. Teshuva itself: remorse is so easy. Even if we do feel guilty, we often content ourselves in merely feeling remorse and that makes us feel like we’re good.

Mark Twain is famous for saying: “To cease smoking is the easiest thing I ever did. I ought to know because I’ve done it a thousand times.”

So just like Paroah, we do become complacent in our habitual norms. Chatasi haPa’am is the cataclysmic realization that I mess up. Just because I’m used to doing something – doesn’t mean it’s right. Just because I’ve done teshuva for it – doesn’t mean I’ve done what I need to do to make a real change.

-chatasi hapa'am – I need to be open to the fact that just because I've been doing something for a while, and I've convinced myself it's justified, doesn't mean it really is justified.

-For example, a person who gets angry at people frequently (family, friends, colleagues) when they mess up – may justify their behavior and have it very much ingrained – to the extent that they don't even think of it as something they ought to do repent for doing and try to do teshuva for

That's Paroah's teshuva lesson number one – be open to recognizing misdeeds, even in the actions we've rationalized or actions that have become habitually ingrained.

**-That's what we recognize when we say: שְׂאִין אֲנַחְנוּ עֲזִי פְּנִים וְקִשִּׁי עֵרְף לֹמֵר
לְפָנֶיךָ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֵלֵינוּ יֵאֱלָקִי צְדִיקִים אֲנַחְנוּ וְלֹא חַטָּאנוּ**

Teshuva lesson number 2 is perhaps even more profound...

Answer 2: Paroah then says “וְאֲנִי וְעַמִּי, הֲרֹשָׁעִים” me and my people are sinners.

While there is value to recognizing what sins we've done, it is so much more productive to realize **why** we've sinned, why a habitually occurring sin is occurring, and then instead of self-flagellation, work the source of the problem.

Modern psychoanalytic theory explains that most problems, certainly interpersonal problems, that occur in life are typically the result of maladaptive coping strategies. Meaning, that we have ways of dealing with uncomfortable emotions and situations as youngsters, and those ways

become mechanisms/modes/ways/strategies for how to deal with discomfort in general

– for example if I feel like someone is mad at me I might either: _____ get angry at them, avoid them, or try to make them not angry at me anymore

-These mechanisms can either be used in balance or these or other mechanisms can become overutilized and [quote] “maladaptive” as a result, meaning they become counterproductive and detrimental to a person’s well-being.

-It stands to reason that the same can and does occur with religious/spiritual well-being

-If we take our example from earlier, the person who is angry... the problem may go back to a learned behavior from one’s upbringing or a coping mechanism that used to be effective at getting desired results as a child or teen, but has become hurtful to one’s self or others.

=> With this basic understanding of maladaptive coping strategies, let’s go back to Paroah

Sometimes, the underlying cause of a problematic or “maladaptive coping strategy” - as in Paroah’s case - is not just familial, but societal. Paroah’s society imbued him with his grandiose delusion of divinity; he played into it but that’s where it came from and Paroah realized that any lasting solution would involve changing not his society – but his relationship to his society. **וְאֲנִי וְעַמִּי, הָרָשָׁעִים**

When we say *אָבֿל אָנְחֿנוּ וְאִבּוֹתֵינוּ חָטְאוּ*, we're priming ourselves to think about *why* we sin in the first place, where did this come from? Why do I find myself behaving or responding to situations this way?

Did I learn to be cynical about Torah or rabbis in my family of origin? or that authority in general is abused?

Did I learn that if you yell the loudest you win?

Did I learn that patience pays off, or that you've always gotta be running?

There are so many lessons, ways of looking at the world, coping mechanisms – that we learned in our family of origin.

So many of the mistakes we find ourselves making year after year - or (better yet) things we've rationalized or dismissed - are a manifestation of a religiously maladaptive coping strategy.

-Like when I feel like I've done something wrong, I stop coming to shul because I feel guilty. That comes from somewhere, a coping strategy of avoiding anxiety inducing situations, but then you just feel worse and further away from Hashem.

-Someone who says I don't know something, so I don't want to learn it, this may be a fear of failure or it may be a fear of success and how that would change how they view themselves.

-Sometimes, we like Paroah learn our lessons from society, that produce religiously maladaptive coping strategies. For example, in society we exalt personal autonomy. Personal autonomy is heralded as perhaps the greatest of secular values. But that can be religiously maladaptive if overutilized. It

negatively impacts on our ability to submit, to do a mitzvah that we don't want to do, it gives us the inclining – maybe I know better. Which is preposterous when the other “perspective” is God's.

On Yom Kippur we say, we all say אָנְחֵנוּ וְאֲבוֹתֵינוּ חָטְאָנוּ – we and our parents have sinned because we are trying to understand not just what we did wrong, but where it came from, how the propensity toward this particular indiscretion or religious maladaptive coping strategy developed.

[Transition to Yizkor]

-AND YET, the upbringing that each one of us had, somehow – whether directly or very indirectly led us to this place, enabled us to have the openness to hear this message - that we can reflect on the values we were raised with.

-Yizkor is certainly a time memorialize the beautiful and wonderful aspects of our loved ones who are so dear to us, and we should do that

- but perhaps the greatest thing we can do as a preamble to Yizkor, as the most meaningful manifestation of Yizkor is to realize the values and issues – both psychological and religious which we developed in childhood ... and redeem those issues.

-Let's recognize, take responsibility, and try to rectify those strategies that have become religiously maladaptive and as our loved ones look down on us from *shamayim*. You would have to think the greatest kindness we could do, the greatest kavod to that loved one and zechut for their neshama,

would be to recognize and work on a religiously maladaptive coping strategy. If we could do that today, or even right now, how proud would those prior generations be - looking down on us from the *Olam Ha'emet*, the realm of Truth.

[Tzedaka Appeal and Conclusion]

Appeal: From our shul's forefathers we've inherited a beautiful custom (that is unfortunately no longer a common custom in the Jewish community at large) to donate this Yom Kippur Yizkor appeal to tzedakah.

– perhaps this custom passed down by the early generation, the family of origin of Ahavat Achim (if you will) reminds us how much good there is to remember and learn from our ancestors, deceased or living – to honor them and to laud and recognize the institutions they established.

-This year, in addition to a select group of worthy Tzedakas that we donate to every year, we are adding....

She'airit Haplate of Bergen county: they are an organization devoted to repurposing leftovers and donations of food to people who are in need of either temporary or long-term food assistance in Bergen county. They have a small operating budget that it is a privilege and Zechut to be able to contribute to – but

what they need from us is also our time. All of their operation is run by volunteers – please speak to or email Eli after Yom tov to find out more...

Conclusion: Let's learn Paroah's lessons about teshuva

1. to be open to considering the things we've gotten so used to, that we forget to view them as problematic and

2. that we think about where the sin comes from, the religious maladaptive coping strategies and try to fix them.

May those efforts be an everlasting merit for Anachnu Va'avoseinu V'acheinu kol Yeit yisrael.