

How Do You See Yourself?

(First Day)

Sgt. Ori Yitchak Locker, a Golani brigade fighter, was on patrol with two other soldiers Itay and Amit when Hamas attacked on October 7th. Ori and his comrades sped toward a breach in the border fence and engaged the first unfaltering terrorists. On their return to base, they encountered dozens of more terrorists heading for Kibbutz Zikim and Kibbutz Karmia. Sgt Ori and his two comrades were significantly outnumbered, but they nonetheless charged towards the enemy knowing they were the only barrier between the terrorists and the kibbutzim. When the IDF forces later arrived at the scene they found numerous dead terrorists alongside the bodies of Ori and his two comrades Itay and Amit's bodies. Their magazines were empty; their vests carried no more ammunition - they battled to the last bullet.

What was the reaction of Ori's family? Ori's twin brother Tamir and his father Eyal both signed up and volunteered to serve in the IDF as reservists - serving side by side, father and son, in the same unit. When Eyal, the father who is 53, was asked how he felt to serve alongside his son Tamir after losing his son Ori, he answered: "I raised my boys not just for one heroic day that people would remember, but to give of themselves as a way of life. And you know what? If [my son] insists on serving I'd rather he be close to me".

This is not an isolated incident. The heroism and going beyond the call of duty has been a constant in the lives of thousands of Israelis since October 7th.

Where does this resolve and conviction come from?

The Torah in Sefer Devarim (book of Deuteronomy, Chapter 26) teaches that farmers in Israel are commanded to "tithe" their crops, according to a three-year cycle. During each of the three years, a portion of the crop known as *Trumah* was given to the Kohanim, the priests, who had no income of their own. Another portion of the produce called *Ma'aser Rishon* was given to the Levites, who also had no income as they also served in the Temple and as teachers. And there was a third tithing, called *Ma'aser Ani* to be given the poor.

When all of this was done, the farmer was then commanded to recite the following declaration to G-d:

וְאָמַרְתָּ לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּעֶרְתִּי הַקֹּדֶשׁ מִן־הַבַּיִת ...

And you shall say before G-d your Lord: I have removed all the sacred portions from my home

... וְגַם נָתַתִּיו לְלוֹי וְלִגֵּר לִיתוּם וְלֹא־לְמִנָּה כְּכָל־מִצְוֹתֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתָנִי ...

and I gave the portions to the Levi, to the convert, and to the widow, according to all the commandments

... לֹא־עֲבַרְתִּי מִמִּצְוֹתֶיךָ וְלֹא שָׁכַחְתִּי:

I haven't violated your commandments and I haven't forgotten anything.

לֹא־אֲכַלְתִּי בְּאֲנִי מִמֶּנּוּ וְלֹא־בִעַרְתִּי מִמֶּנּוּ בְטָמֵא וְלֹא־נָתַתִּי מִמֶּנּוּ לְמֵת
שָׁמַעְתִּי בְּקוֹל ה' אֱלֹהֵי עֲשִׂיתִי כְּכָל אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתָנִי:

I have listened to the voice of my G-d and done everything You have commanded me.

Basically, the Jewish farmer is commanded to declare that he's done everything correctly – that he's crossed his T's and dotted his I's. But why? He knows he did it and G-d knows he did it so what's the point of this whole declaration? Also, the Talmud calls this declaration *Viduy Ma'aser* - the "Tithing Confession" but why is it called a confession? A confession is where you admit to some wrongdoing and you seek forgiveness, like when during Selichot or on Yom Kippur we say *Ashamnu, Bagadu* ... admitting our sins and expressing remorse. The *Ma'aser Viduy* (Tithing Confession) seems to be the furthest things from a confession! It would be the equivalent to a husband turning to his wife and saying: "honey I have a confession: I've done everything I was supposed to do as a husband. I'm loyal, considerate and sensitive all the time. I'm really just amazing".

What kind of confession is that?

The *Ma'aser Viduy* reveals a powerful truth: we need to acknowledge our goodness and the positive power we possess. And we need to verbalize it in a very specific manner – in this case to acknowledge that we correctly fulfilled Hashem's will to tithe our crops. And it's called a "confession" because only when we believe we're good, can we truly regret our mistakes and failures and want to fix them. Because if I see myself as a loser, as someone fundamentally and spiritually flawed, then why would I feel any remorse for my sins and wrongdoings? That's just who I am – a lowlife who sins. Only when we believe in our goodness will we regret our mistakes and work on improving ourselves.

This is key in parenting. When a child does something inappropriate, if the parent berates the kid and just tells the kid how awful their behavior is – that approach won't be nearly as effective as reminding the child of how good a boy or girl he or she is and therefore how out of line this behavior is with their goodness. How could someone like you, such a good kid, so good do such a thing? If the kid thinks he's nothing, then why not act out? It's like spilling some juice on an already stained shirt - who cares? You probably won't even notice the juice stain since the garment is already dirty. But if I see myself as pure, if my shirt is white, I'm going to notice the stain and I'm going to want to clean it off.

Our shirts and blouses are white, and even if we don't always feel that way, today on Rosh Hashanah we tap into that part of ourselves. The part of us is pure and holy. The part that wants to be connected to our Creator and that wants to do the right thing.

When the Torah speaks of the mitzvah of *shichecha*, the obligation of a Jewish farmer to leave the wheat he forgot to harvest for the poor, the verse in the Torah concludes with the words: *liman yivarechicha* - "in order that you be blessed". Rashi tells us that just like a person receives a blessing for unintentionally dropping wheat for the poor, so too, if one accidentally drops a coin and a poor person finds the coin and sustains himself with it, the person who dropped the coin also receives a blessing.

But why is a person blessed for something they didn't even try to do? The person who drops the coin had no intention of helping the poor, and yet the Torah says he will be blessed! Because, as the Lubavitcher Rebbe answered, every Jew no matter their background, deep down wishes to follow all that the Torah commands. The fact that we may sometimes be influenced to do otherwise is only because our conscious state is affected by external pressures which are contrary to our essential nature, which is to follow G-d's will as expressed in the Torah. Therefore, if one performs a mitzvah which he did NOT intend to do, it is nevertheless considered an act which is consistent with our inner desire.

This explanation can help us understand a difficult passage in the Rambam: The Rambam in the laws of divorce wrote that where a man is supposed to give his wife a *get*, a divorce writ, but refuses to do so: *makin o'so ad shayomar rotza ani* - "the Jewish Court can hit him until he says I want to give the *get*" and the divorce is then

valid! How could a get be valid if the man gave it because the Jewish court hit him? Coercion, where one is pressured or forced in some way deems the contact null and void!

To answer this question, some suggest, that even though on the surface it appears the man is being forced to give his wife a get since subconsciously he wants to do the right thing, hitting him is just a way to align his outer state, with his inner state which truly wants to do the good.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik taught that *in our essence* we seek to fulfill the mitzvot, and yes of course we make mistakes, and we sin, but that does not come from our inner personality. Sin comes from external influences and “the cultural ambience” of the world around us. “Our deepest desire”, says the Rav, “stronger than any other impulse, is to do G-d’s will based on this innate connection we all possess. And when we do carry out Hashem’s will, when we show up to her on a Shabbat, to pray on a Wednesday night, to learn, we manifest, and we give expression to that inner desire.

The only question is whether we look at ourselves in this way. Do we recognize this beautiful and holy part of who we are? In 2013, there was a fascinating study called “Real Beauty Sketches” conducted by Gil Zemora, an FBI trained forensic artist who asked individuals to describe their own physical features - their facial structure and other prominent features, so he could sketch a portrait. The artist was seated behind a curtain so he couldn’t see the people he was sketching; he relied exclusively on their own self-descriptions. After Zemora drew the portrait, he then called in a random stranger to describe the same person’s features and based on the stranger’s description created a second portrait.

In all cases, the contrast between the two portraits was significant: the sketches made based on the stranger’s description showed the subject in a more beautiful, happier and more accurate manner than the portraits which were made based on the subject’s own self-description.

We are so much more beautiful than we imagine. The portraits we paint ourselves often sell us short. If we go back to the original portrait, the one made by the original Creator, the Torah tells us *b’tzelem elokim nivrah h’adam* – “in the image of G-d man was formed”. That’s who we really are and that is why we call what we do on the High Holidays *teshuva* - “to return”- why we call someone who becomes religiously observant a *ba’al teshuva* - a “master of return”. This expression implies that the person was originally observant and is now returning to where he or she was before. But classically a *ba’al teshuva*, was *not* observant in the past and the word *Teshuva* – “to return” implies we were once there! When were we there?

Metaphysically our souls were created in a state that is spiritually connected to G-d. We all possess, the Kabbalists teach a *nefesh elokit*, a G-dly soul, which in its natural state is both connected to and an expression of G-d. Sin creates distance, a deviation from our natural state of spiritual closeness. And that’s why our response to whatever mistakes or sins we commit is *teshuva*, to return our souls to their original and rightful place, through the path G-d outlined for us in His Torah.

And so, when we make our confessions and resolutions this year, besides pointing out our mistakes and how we intend to do better in the coming year, we should also remind ourselves, like the Jewish farmer, of all we’ve done right and of our inner capacity for goodness. That will motivate us to repair the breaches and fix our mistakes – because we think highly of ourselves.

And this is also true on the national level: on this Rosh Hashanah we should not pray for but express pride in the IDF and what Jews throughout the world have done to defend Israel. While so many others have been critical, Israel and the Jewish people deserve a pat on the back for staying strong and resolute. For not cowering to our enemies and not losing faith in our Judaism. When you’re pushed to the wall, as we all have been these

last two years, we go back to the deepest part of who we are to find our strength - to the *Nefesh Elokit* within us, to our mission to be an *Ohr L'goyim*, "a light unto the nations". Giving ourselves that pat on the back, for whatever Jewish we do, whether it's taking off from work today to be here on Rosh Hashanah, to all the other sacrifices we make to stay strong in our Judaism.

We give ourselves that pat on the back - not to be arrogant or to remain complacent, but as a reminder of the great purity and holiness we possess. Of the white shirt we are wearing so, when we stain it, we are motivated these High Holidays to clean it up and make ourselves even better. Let's see ourselves for the great people we are, and in doing so, may we all be blessed with a sweet New Year to come, both for us and our brothers and sisters in Israel.

Shanah Tova!