

TIMELESS∞TORAH

Brighter Future

What if you knew that, ten years from now, you would look back on this Yom Kippur with enormous nostalgia?

Psychologists have tested a version of this idea. In a series of studies on what they called ‘anticipated nostalgia’, participants were asked to imagine themselves in the future looking back on experiences they were having in the present. Those who did so were more likely to savour those experiences while they were happening. Imagining the future memory changed the present experience (Cheung et al., ‘Anticipated Nostalgia: Looking Forward to Looking Back’, *Cognition and Emotion* 34:3 (2020)).

There is something very Jewish about this idea. Parshat Haazinu tells us: ‘*Zechor yemot olam, binu shenot dor v’dor* – Remember the days of old, consider the years of the generations’ (Devarim 32:7).

The Sifrei understands this as an invitation to reflect on Jewish history. Rashi explains that we should look at what happened to earlier generations and recognise the consequences of their choices. Remembering the past is meant to affect the way we live now.

This is one reason why Jewish history can be such a powerful source of *emunah*. I am often asked how someone can strengthen their faith, and one of the answers I give is to study the history of our people. The Jewish story is long enough to contain almost every possible experience: periods of flourishing and persecution, moments of extraordinary courage and times of terrible failure. When we see our own lives within that larger story, our perspective changes.

The same principle lies behind much of the Selichot around Yom Kippur. We return to the Golden Calf and the sin of the Spies, events that took place thousands of years ago. They are remembered because they still have something to teach us. Jewish memory is

closely connected to teshuvah: we look back in order to understand what needs to be different in the future.

That is also why the Vidui (confessional prayer) is so carefully constructed. We do not simply say that we have sinned. We name particular failures, sometimes repeatedly, and bring them before Hashem. There is something demanding about that process. It asks us to resist the temptation to blur the past into a general feeling of regret. Teshuvah begins when we are prepared to be specific.

Two stories illustrate this particularly well.

The Core Issue

The first is the story of Yeravam ben Nevat. After the Israelite kingdom was divided in the reign of Rechavam, Yeravam became king of the northern kingdom of Israel. The Beit HaMikdash remained in Jerusalem, however, in the territory of the southern kingdom. Yeravam feared that continued pilgrimage to Jerusalem would weaken his position and restore the people’s allegiance to the House of David. He therefore established alternative centres of worship, placing golden calves in Beit El and Dan (Kings I, chapter 12).

The Mishnah in Pirkei Avot (5:18) uses Yeravam as the example of someone who ‘sins and causes others to sin’. His decision had consequences that continued for generations.

The Gemara in Sanhedrin (102a) tells us something remarkable about what lay behind it. Hashem offered Yeravam the opportunity to repent. He would merit walking in Gan Eden together with Hashem and King David himself. Yeravam asked who would walk first. When he was told that David would, he rejected the offer.

The Gemara is pointing towards the motive beneath his actions. Yeravam could not accept the prospect of David receiving greater honour



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than he did. His concern with honour was more important to him than the opportunity to change.

That is an important consideration when we think about teshuvah. It is possible to regret something we have done without asking why we did it. We can resolve not to repeat a particular action while leaving untouched the character trait or attitude that produced it.

The Alter of Novardok, Rabbi Yosef Yoizel Horowitz (d. 1919), emphasised the importance of this deeper work. Teshuvah requires a person to examine the qualities that lie behind their behaviour. If those qualities remain unchanged, the same problems are likely to appear again in another form.

Open Pathway

The story of Elisha ben Avuyah takes us in another, equally important, direction. Elisha was one of the great sages of the Tannaitic period and the teacher of Rabbi Meir. The Gemara in Chagigah (15a) relates that he was one of four sages who entered the *Pardes*, a profound mystical experience. Elisha emerged from it in a very different state and eventually turned away from the Torah. He became known as 'Acher', 'the other one'.

Rabbi Meir continued to try to bring his teacher back. Acher, however, told him that he had heard in Heaven that everyone could repent except for him.

There is a revealing connection with a Mishnah that Elisha ben Avuyah himself had taught earlier in his life. In Pirkei Avot (4:20), he compares learning when young to writing on fresh paper, while learning later in life is compared to writing on paper that has already been erased. The first impression is deeper.

Perhaps, by the end of his life, Acher had begun to see himself in the same way. His past had become so dominant that he could no

longer imagine becoming someone different. He had become 'Acher', and that identity seemed to leave no room for Elisha to return. This is one of the great challenges of teshuvah. We need enough honesty to look directly at our past, but not so much attachment to it that we assume it defines us permanently. In a sense, Haazinu asks us to remember the past. Yom Kippur asks us what we are going to do with what we remember.

Yeravam teaches us to look beneath our actions and identify what needs to change. Acher reminds us that we can lose the ability to change if we convince ourselves that our past has already determined our future. Teshuvah asks us to hold both ideas together. We cannot ignore who we have been. But neither should we assume that who we have been is who we must remain.

When we stand before Hashem on Yom Kippur, we are looking backwards and forwards at the same time. We remember the days of old, but we are also being asked to consider the years ahead.

Perhaps that is the deeper meaning of the strange combination of memory and hope in Haazinu. The past is not there to trap us. It is there to teach us. A person who remembers honestly can make better choices because they have learnt something from where they have been.

The future is not yet written. That is why teshuvah matters. On Yom Kippur, we release ourselves from the constraints of yesterday, so that we can begin writing a different tomorrow.

NEXT WEEK: SUKKOT

Leaving Home to Find Home

What Succot Teaches Us About Where We Belong