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**Yes, We are Great**

**By Rabbi Joey Haber**



**Rabbi Joey Haber**

Lehman Brothers was one of the most powerful financial institutions in the world until it filed for bankruptcy and folded during the crisis of 2008.

The story goes that the Stephen Schwartzman, CEO of a different company – Blackstone – called the CEO of Lehman Brothers before it shut down.

“Listen,” he said, “your company has $675 billion worth of assets. $650 billion of those assets are fine; only $25 billion of them are bad. The $650 billion worth of assets will be able to weather the storm fairly well. So this is what I suggest you do. Break up Lehman Brothers and form two companies – one with the $650 billion, and the other with the $25 billion. The $25 billion company will go bankrupt and fold, but the rest will survive.

Unfortunately, the CEO of Lehman Brothers couldn’t get it done, and so the entire company collapsed – because of the $25 billion worth of troubled assets.

This story, I believe, serves as a very powerful metaphor for the mistake so many of us make during this time of year, and for the proper approach that we should be taking.

**We So Often Fall into the Trap of Just Giving Up**

When it comes to doing teshuva, introspecting, examining ourselves and seeing what we need to improve, we so often fall into the trap of just giving up, of just saying, “Whatever.” We tell ourselves, “Look – I don’t do that so well, I don’t do this, I’m bad at that, I should be doing this, I mess up that… Whatever, I’m just bad. I should be better.”

If we think we’re just bad, then we’ll give up. We’ll let our whole lives go “bankrupt,” without trying to save anything.

The correct approach to teshuvah is to identify the $25 billion of rotten assets. To isolate the areas that aren’t right. To recognize and appreciate the $650 billion worth of good that we have. To realize that yes, we are great. Our “company” is doing just fine – as long as we address the little part of ourselves that is problematic.

**The Importance of Being Specific with Our Particular Sins**

This is why when we recite vidui on Yom Kippur, confessing our sins, we are very specific. We don’t just proclaim a generic, “We have sinned.” We go through the trouble of listing all the particular things we’ve done wrong. If we just say, “We have sinned,” we aren’t accomplishing anything. That’s basically saying, “I’m bad, whatever…” By specifying our particular sins, we are identifying the $25 billion so we can rid of them and salvage the rest.

This work is something that each individual needs to do for himself. Nobody can tell any of us what we need to change. We each have to think carefully and honestly to identify that $25 billion that needs to be thrown away.

But the first step is to recognize that $650 billion is fine. Yes, we are great. We are not perfect, but we are great. And it is specifically because we are great that it is worth it for each and every one of us to take the time and make an effort to find the not-so-great part of our beings and address it, so that we can be even better.

*Reprinted from the Parshat Vayelech 5781 email of Rabbi David Bibi’s Shabbat Shalom from Cyberspace.*

**Yom Kippur Reflections**

**By Rabbi Yaakov Menken**



**Rabbi Yaakov Menken**

We find ourselves this week in the midst of the Ten Days of Repentance, the days from Rosh HaShana to Yom Kippur. An interesting idea – ten days for self-examination, reflection, and (we hope) self-improvement. But do we understand “repentance?”

The world today almost laughs at “sin” and “repentance.” Almost? Let me rephrase that: the world does laugh at the whole idea of “sin.” Part of that is denial – if I laugh at something, I don’t have to take it seriously. Another part, however, comes from the non-Jewish conception of sin and repentance – which, because of the society we live in, has become quite pervasive in Jewish minds.

**Could Not be Further from**

**The Jewish Idea of Repentance**

Many who no longer go to church describe confession as “going on Sunday to confess what we did Friday, and plan to do again on Tuesday.” I don’t know if that’s accurate; I’m Jewish. I only know that this could not be further from the Jewish idea of repentance.

So instead of these terms, let us use “transgression” and “return,” words which correspond more closely to a Jewish understanding of these concepts. Indeed, while we may translate “Teshuva” as repentance, it comes from the infinitive LaShuv: to return.

We know certain things to be right, and others to be wrong, and we cross the line. We go where we should not have gone – and in doing so, we move away from G-d. But in His great kindness, He leaves the door open for us to come back to Him, and restore our connection. That is the purpose of return – to come back to G-d.

If so, is it not obvious that Teshuva must happen in our hearts, and not in our mouths? Rambam, in his codification of Jewish Law, says this explicitely (Hil. Tshuva 2:3): “One who confesses with words, but has not decided in his heart to abandon his transgressions, is like a person who goes to a ritual bath while holding something unclean in his hand: immersion in the bath will not help him until he throws the item away!”

**An Activity of the Heart**

Repentance is an activity of the heart – a decision to change our behavior, and to abandon a path that has led us away from G-d instead of towards Him. And to make it easier for us, G-d gave us a certain time of year when He comes close to us, and invites us to go in the right direction.

The Talmud in tractate Rosh HaShana says that the verse, “Seek out G-d when He can be found, call upon Him when He is close” (Isaiah 55:6) refers to these Ten Days. Maimonides also says (2:6) that “Even though return and crying [over our errors] is always beautiful, during the ten days between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur it is exceptionally so, and is accepted immediately” – and he refers us again to that same verse.

It is as if G-d is right here in the neighborhood, and all we need to do is drop in! It is that easy for us to use this time for a rebirth, for making new beginnings in the right direction. Should we wake up in two weeks, feeling as if He left without us? Let’s take advantage of this time of year, and come away from the season feeling closer to G-d. (Project Genesis)

*Reprinted from the Haazinu/Yom Kippur 5781 email of Reb Yedidye Hirtenfeld’s whY I Matter parshas sheet for the Young Israel of Midwood in Brooklyn.*

**That Girl from**

**The Sixth Grade**

**By Rabbi Label Lam**

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**Rabbi Label Lam**

A bunch of years back on Erev Pesach I got a call, a blast from the past. A young Jewish girl, Leslie S someone I had gone to public elementary school and public high school with many moons ago was reaching out for some spiritual assistance.

She called me by my English name and introduced herself. We had not spoken since 6th grade but I remembered immediately who she was. She told me that she heard I became a Rabbi and she hoped I could guide her on a certain matter. I neither denied nor confirmed her claim about me but I did agree to listen carefully to her plight and do what I could.

**I Asked if She was Still in**

**Touch with Any Former Classmates**

When the conversation was winding down I asked her if she was in touch with anyone from the old days and she shared with me a short list of people, some of whom I remembered and inquired about.

Then she asked me whether I was in touch with anyone from way back then. I have a friend who had become Shomer Shabbos like me and he was basically the only one that I have any connection to after all these many years. So I told her I’m still in close contact with, let us say Steve Goldberg (the name has been changed).

When I just mentioned his name, she immediately chimed in, “Steve Goldberg!? He pulled the chair out from under me in 6th grade!”

After we hung up I called my buddy and asked him to guess who just called. There was no way he was going to get it so I dropped her name, “Leslie S!”

He responded laughingly, “Leslie S? I pulled the chair out from under her in 6th grade!” I told him, “I know! When I mentioned your name, she told me!”

He got such a shock! “SHE REMEMBERED!? SHE REMEMBERED!? I have to give her a call myself and ask for forgiveness!”

Here it was more than 40 years later and Leslie S did not forget and certainly G-d does not forget either, and we must act here and now to avoid being surprised with a blast from the past.

*Reprinted from the Haazinu/Yom Kippur 5781 email of Reb Yedidye Hirtenfeld’s whY I Matter parshas sheet for the Young Israel of Midwood in Brooklyn.*

**Vignettes for Yom Kippur**

Rav Menachem Mendel Yosef Zaks, zt”l, the son-in-law of the Chofetz Chaim, wrote, “Once, before Yom Kippur, the Chofetz Chaim Bentched me, and said, ‘Reb Mendel, HaKadosh Baruch Hu should help that you not become wealthy!’ At that moment, a man standing behind me who was also waiting for a Brachah from the Chofetz Chaim, said out loud, ‘Rebbi! What are you saying? How could you Bentch someone like that?”

The Chofetz Chaim responded, “Hashem should give you all that you need, but for Rav Mendel, I am Bentching him with the same exact Brachah that I would want for myself!”

In his last years, the long, often hot day of the fast of Yom Kippur, would be hard on Rav Isser Zalman Meltzer, zt”l. One Yom Kippur, he felt particularly unwell, so he went to lie down in one of the rooms and asked a Bachur to bring him a pillow.

Half an hour later, he returned to the Bais Medrash, and one of his close Talmidim asked him if he felt any better. Rav Isser Zalman replied that in fact, the rest had made him feel a little worse.

The Talmid asked, “Why did the Rebbe not return immediately, if resting was worsening the condition?”



Rav Isser Zalman looked surprised, and said, “If I came back too quickly, the Bachur who brought me the pillow might feel bad, and that he bothered himself for no reason. I could never do that to another person!”

Rav Mendel Kaplan, zt”l, would say, “The main thing about Yom Kippur is not to bang your chest, but to look for ways to improve yourself. Nowadays people enjoy saying a long Viduy on Yom Kippur.

Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzenski, zt”l, and Rav Elchonon Wasserman, zt”l, were brothers-in-law, and one year Rav Elchonon asked Rav Chaim Ozer how his Yom Kippur fast had gone.

Rav Chaim Ozer answered that the fast was bearable but confessing his Aveiros was too hard for him! That’s how the Al Cheits are supposed to be — more painful than the fast!”

It was the first Erev Yom Kippur in Bergen-Belsen after the liberation, and Rivka Horowitz, always energetic and bursting with ideas, had a plan. She somehow obtained two portable sewing machines and asked her friends, Eda Laufer and Sarah Bodner, if they would help her sew Yarmulkas for the young men.

When word got out that there would be Yarmulkas for Yom Kippur, long lines started to form for them.

Eda later recounted, “We had to eat our Erev Yom Kippur meals at the sewing machines, but scores of young men went to Daven that night wearing Yarmulkas for the first time since the war, and that was our greatest reward!”

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