

THE DANGER OF DOUBT: And the Courage To Face Uncertainty

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THE REMA¹ BEGINS his guidance for the Aseret Yemei Teshuvah with a call to examine our actions, reflect, and repent. He interrupts his usual legal tone with a strikingly introspective and ethical reflection:

רמ"א על שולחן ערוך אורח חיים תרג"א
וספק עבירה צריך יותר תשובה מעבירה ודאי,
כי יותר מתחרט כשיודע שעשה משאינו יודע.

Rema on Shulhan Arukh Orach Hayyim
603:1

A doubtful sin (where one is unsure whether they sinned) requires even greater repentance than a definite sin, because one feels more regret when they know they have sinned than when they are uncertain.

To illustrate this, the Rema compares two sacrifices: the *hattat* (sin offering) and the *asham talui* (suspended guilt offering). *Hazal* explain that a *hattat* is brought by someone who knows for certain that they sinned unintentionally, while an *asham talui* is brought by someone uncertain of whether they sinned at all. For example, if a person eats one of two pieces of meat and later learns that one of them contained forbidden fat, but does not know which piece they ate, they bring an *asham talui* (Mishnah Keritot 4:1). If they later discover that they indeed ate the forbidden piece, they must then bring a regular *hattat* as well.

The *asham talui* is typically a ram, while the *hattat* is typically a sheep. As noted already by the Tannaim (in Sifra Dibbura de-Hovah *parashah* 12), this means that an *asham talui* is more expensive than a *hattat*. But why should that

be the case? Why is a doubtful transgression treated more severely than a definite one? And how should this, as the Rema emphasizes for us, influence our process of *teshuvah* during the High Holiday period?

The Ramban² suggests that the higher price tag on the *asham talui* reminds us that God can hold us accountable even for sins we do not know about.

רמב"ן ויקרא ה:טו

וטעם אשם תלוי, מפני שבעליו סבור שאין עליו
עונש כי לא נודע שחטא, מפני זה החמיר עליו
הכתוב בספקו יותר מודאו.

Ramban on Leviticus 5:15

The reason for the asham talui is because the responsible party might think that they are not liable to be punished; therefore Scripture was more severe with them in the case of doubt than in the case of certainty.

A person who knows they have sinned feels guilty, but a person in doubt might become apathetic, assuming they will not be punished for something so unclear. To counteract this complacency, the higher cost of the *asham talui* forces the person to take the possibility of sin seriously. Even if the sin is doubtful to the person, it may be certain to God ("Who," the Ramban goes on to say, "knows all hidden things"); and if they indeed sinned, they will be punished if they treat the matter lightly. The *asham talui* reminds us of the breadth of our moral responsibility: we

1 R. Moses Isserles (Poland, c. 1520–1572).

2 R. Moshe ben Nahman (Catalonia, 1194–c. 1270).

are accountable not only for our known actions, but even more so for those that leave us uncertain.

In a similar vein, Rabbeinu Yonah³ recognizes that a case of doubt can lead to *post facto* justifications. He adds an important psychological explanation for the higher price of the *asham talui*:

רבינו יונה על רי"ף ברכות א:
על הודאי משים האדם החטא אל לבו ודואג
ומתחרט עליו וחוזר בתשובה שלימה אבל על
הספק עושה סברות ואומר אותה חתיכה שאכלתי
אולי היתה מותרת ולא ישית אל לבו לשוב ולזה
החמירו בו יותר.

Rabbeinu Yonah on Rif Berakhot 1b

When a person knows they have sinned, they set the sin upon their heart, worry, regret, and repent completely. But for the doubtful case, a person reasons, "Perhaps the piece I ate was permitted," and does not place the matter upon their heart to repent. Therefore they made it stricter.

Certainty of guilt evokes remorse and change; uncertainty breeds rationalization and complacency. We tell ourselves comforting stories—maybe it wasn't wrong, maybe it wasn't me—and thus never truly repent. The high cost makes the doubt itself so burdensome that it forces the person to feel the gravity of their situation and to go through the internal process of repentance they might otherwise have skipped.

The *asham talui* teaches a powerful lesson for the Aseret Yemei Teshuvah. It reminds us that doubt itself carries spiritual weight. Uncertainty can easily lead to avoidance, rationalization, or complacency, but the higher cost of the *asham talui* transforms that doubt into a call for greater awareness. During these days, we are challenged to confront the gray areas of our lives, to examine the moments of hesitation, neglect, or moral ambiguity we prefer to ignore. By doing so, we protect ourselves from future sin and inner unrest, turning uncertainty itself into a catalyst for deeper self-awareness, responsibility, and *teshuvah*. ♦

3 R. Yonah Gerondi (of Gerona, d. 1263).