



Teshuvah: Light or Salvation?

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Thinking about our own transgressions and repentance is hard, and so it makes sense that we often latch on to metaphors to help us think about these ideas. Perhaps the strangest metaphor I know of appears in the Zohar:

זוהר, רעיא מהימנא ג (פרשת צו) דף כח. דהכי איהו אשם וחטאת כסרכות דאחידן בריא	Zohar, Raya Mehimna 3 (Parashat Tzav) 28a For thus is the nature of sins, [they are] like adhesions that cling to the lung.
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The jarring metaphor is based on the halakhic principle that an animal with a puncture in one of its lungs is not kosher; an animal with only an adhesion on its lung, however, has an unclear status: since the adhesion may be covering over an actual puncture wound, some authorities are strict to forbid such an animal, while others permit it if the adhesion can be removed, revealing undamaged tissue beneath.¹

What does the process of *teshuvah* have to do with lung adhesions in animals?

¹ This is the origin of the difference between *glatt* (literally “smooth” in Yiddish, i.e., with no adhesions) and non-*glatt* kosher meat.



The Shem mi-Shmuel² takes the comparison very seriously, learning something deep about the nature of *teshuvah* from these specific laws:

שם משמאל, שבת תשובה תר"ף	Shem mi-Shmuel, Shabbat Shuvah 5680
וידועה מחלוקת רש"י ותוס' (חולין מ"ו ב) בענין טעמא דטריפות הסירכות, דעת רש"י כי אין סירכא בלא נקב וא"כ הריאה היא כבר נקובה, ודעת התוס' משום דסופה להתפרק וליעשות נקב, ובדאי אידי ואידי דא"ח.	The debate of Rashi and Tosafot regarding the reason for adhesions rendering the animal non-kosher is known: Rashi's view is that adhesions always indicate the presence of punctures, and if so, the lung is already punctured [which unambiguously renders the animal non-kosher]. But the opinion of Tosafot is that it is because it will eventually break down and become punctured. And certainly, both of these views are the words of the living God.

According to the Shem mi-Shmuel, this framework is what the Zohar had in mind when it compared sins to adhesions of the lungs. Just as there are two kinds of adhesions—those obscuring a wound, and those which are precursors to such an injury—so too there are two kinds of transgressions:

יש שבאין מכח שכבר כלתה ממנו חיות הקדושה ע"י העבירות... וזוהי הסירכא שע"י נקב. ויש... ואובדת ממנו החיות לאט לאט עד שיבוא לידי עבירות חמורות בשאט נפש... וזוהי סירכא שסופה	Some [transgressions] are a result of the holy life force already having been depleted because of [past] transgressions... This is an adhesion on top of a puncture. But there [are others]... that deplete bit-by-bit the life force, until one comes to serious transgressions with contempt... And this is an adhesion that is destined to
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² R. Shmuel Bornsztain (1855-1926), the second Sochotchover Rebbe.



לנקוב: become a puncture.

In other words, sometimes we are doing *teshuvah* for serious past wrongs; at other times, the thing we're working on is not a grievous failing in our past, but something small, maybe even simply a tendency or trait that, if left untended to, will lead to grave transgressions in the future. These are two different kinds of transgression, which therefore require different responses.

The Shem mi-Shmuel connects this idea to a classical *midrash* on a verse we say twice every day during the months of Elul and most of Tishrei:³ “Hashem is my light and my salvation” (ה' (אורי וישעי).

מדרש תהלים מזמור כז	Midrash Tehillim Psalm 27
רבנין פתרי קרא בראש השנה וביום הכפורים.	The Rabbis explain the verse as referring to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.
אורי בראש השנה...	“My light” on Rosh Hashanah...
וישעי ביום הכפורים, שיושיענו וימחול לנו על כל עונותינו.	“And my salvation” on Yom Kippur, that God should save us and forgive us for all of our sins.

Why is Rosh Hashanah associated with light, and Yom Kippur with salvation? The Shem mi-Shmuel answers:

והנה בר"ה הוא מעין חידוש	Behold, Rosh Hashanah is like a new act of creation... My
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³ The earliest appearance of the practice is in R. Ya'akov Emden's *Siddur Beit Ya'akov* in the 18th century.



בריא... והגיד כ"ק אבי אדמו"ר זצללה"ה שענין השופר הוא הפחת רוח חיים חדשים בלב ישראל, כמו שהי' בתחילת הבריאה שכתוב ויפח באפיו נשמת חיים... וע"כ השופר מועיל אפי' למי שכבר כלתה ונאבדה חיותו ממנו לגמרי, אם עכ"פ הוא יודע ומבין למצבו כי ברע הוא... וזוה אורי בר"ה כעין בבריאת העולם שהי' חושך לגמרי נעדר מכל אור, ונתהוה חדשות שאמר אלקים יהי אור ויהי אור... אך זה שהוא כסירכא שסופה לנקוב חמור מן הראשון שעכ"פ יודע ומבין כנ"ל, אבל זה שאבדה ממנו החיות לאט לאט... והוא כבשר המת שאינו מרגיש באיזמל, זה נצרך לישועה גדולה מאד... וישועה היא אף כשהנושע אינו עושה מעצמו מאומה והוא כבשר המת וכל הישועה באה מכח זולתו... וזהו ענין יוהכ"פ שישראל נושעים.	father, our Rebbe,⁴ of blessed memory, said that the meaning of the <i>shofar</i> is that it is a breathing of new life into the heart of Israel, just as in the beginning of Creation it is written “And [God] breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (Bereishit 2:7)... And therefore the <i>shofar</i> works even for those who have completely lost their life force, provided they at least know and understand that their [spiritual] situation is endangered.... And that is the meaning of “My light—on Rosh Hashanah,” something like the Creation of the world, which was total darkness lacking in any light, and newness came into being when God said “Let there be light,” and there was light... But the adhesion that is destined to become a puncture is more serious than the first kind, where at least one realizes [that they have transgressed]. But the one who loses their life force bit-by-bit.... That is like a corpse that does not feel the scalpel; this requires a greater salvation.... Salvation [as opposed to mere help] is when the one being saved does nothing on their own... and all of the salvation comes from another’s actions... And that is Yom Kippur, on which Israel is saved.
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Rosh Hashanah, in this framing, is the less radical holiday, because it “merely” resolves those

⁴ R. Avraham Bornsztain (1838-1910), the first Sochotchover Rebbe.



transgressions that we've already committed; because they are already committed, we realize that we must atone for them, and we're therefore able to initiate a process of *teshuvah*. Rosh Hashanah, with the breath of the *shofar*, gives us a fresh start—an incredible, miraculous opportunity—but one which only repairs that which we already know we must be working on, and which we therefore already are working on.

Yom Kippur, by contrast, is an even greater miracle—an act of salvation, because it atones for those transgressions we've not yet engaged in, but which our growing spiritual numbness might be leading us towards. Since we are not ourselves attuned to this ethical slide, we do not even understand that we must be working and engaging in *teshuvah* for it; the salvation of Yom Kippur comes, even without our taking the first step, to redeem us from this spiritual numbness.

This is how we begin the month of Elul, reciting a psalm that alludes both to the light and to the salvation of our great holidays of repentance. We acknowledge, twice each day, that the *teshuvah* we are working on and the subsequent act of atonement takes two forms—the light of Rosh Hashanah, and the salvation of Yom Kippur. It is easier to work on the former. When we know we have gone astray and failed to live up to our own values, we can begin a process that will lead to a total rebirth, a darkness made bright on Rosh Hashanah. The second process of *teshuvah*, however, is much harder, and therefore requires even more of our attention in Elul. What are the slow, subtle shifts in my actions and thinking that are leading me toward an even deeper darkness? What are the small deviations from my commitments that, if ignored, might bring me to a place of ethical failing that I could not get back from?

On the one hand, only the salvation of Yom Kippur can bring these to the fore and redeem us from our own spiritual numbness. Yet we begin, 40 days earlier on the first of Elul, reminding ourselves that we are to engage in both kinds of *teshuvah*: to examine not only our past



failings, which is easier, but also the potential roots of future shortcomings. That is hard, but ultimately optimistic work, rooted in both a belief that we can interrupt the moral slide of inertia, and a faith that Hashem will support us in this work, saving us on Yom Kippur from those parts of ourselves that we ourselves cannot see.

