**The Special Characteristics of Teshuva**

In this essay, we will explore the concept of *teshuva*, repentance. The word *teshuva* literally means returning, as repentance, by definition, entails resolving to return to our Maker, thereby strengthening our relationship with Him. It is our hope that the reader will emerge with the realization that the seemingly daunting task of *teshuva* is not only attainable, but is indeed helped along by none other than Hashem himself.

The Gemara states:

Rav Berekhya said that even *B’nei Yisrael*, the Jewish People, made an improper request, yet Hashem responded to them properly, as it says, “Let us know; let us pursue the knowledge of Hashem. His going forth is sure as the morning, and He shall come to us like the rain that satiates the earth. (Hosea 6:3).” Hashem responded to *Yisrael*, “My daughter, you request something which at times is desirable and at other times is not desirable, but I will be for you something which is desirable at all times, as it says, ‘I will be like the dew to Yisrael. (Hosea 3:15).’”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The above passage deals with the concept of *teshuva*, repentance. *B’nei Yisrael* requested that Hashem bestow His presence upon them like rain, which is readily noticed by all when it arrives, yet only falls periodically. Hashem replied that He will make His presence dwell among them in a much more subtle yet consistent manner, just like the dew which is mostly unnoticed, yet appears each morning as if of its own accord. Hashem further promises *B’nei Yisrael*, who only asked for His presence to be perceived occasionally, even more than they requested: a commitment to consistently dwell among them so as to ensure their spiritual progress. While this interpretation of the Midrash is indeed profound, Rav Yehonatan Eibeschitz (1690-1764, Poland) explains that this dialogue contains an even deeper and more profound meaning, connected to the scientific difference between rain and dew.

Rav Eibeschitz, based upon the scientific understanding of his day, explains that rain falls as a result of water on the ground evaporating, accumulating in the form of clouds in the sky, and falling back to the ground only once the clouds can no longer contain more water. Therefore, if the ground were to be too dry, there could be no rain. Dew, in contrast, does not emanate from the ground; rather, its source is the consistent dampness of the air, and therefore can always be depended upon to appear.

Based on this scientific analysis, Rav Eibeschitz explains further that rain and dew are analogous to two forms of the *teshuva* process. Hashem wants His people to repent, and is even willing to assist them in returning to Him. Ordinarily, however, the sinner must take the first step and initiate the process by showing remorse and demonstrating a desire to change. Only after the penitent makes the first move, Hashem responds in kind by offering His assistance. The Midrash seems to support this notion when it declares, “Anyone who comes to purify himself will receive assistance.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Similarly, another Midrash teaches, “Hashem said, ‘If you make for me an opening as wide as the eye of a needle, I will make for you openings wide enough to let through wagons and carriages.’”[[3]](#footnote-3) The latter Midrash bolsters the idea that if man just begins on the road to atonement, Hashem will enable his further spiritual progress. This is the first form of *teshuva*.

Rav Eibeschitz notes that this two-step order of the *teshuva* process only applies under ordinary historical circumstances. There will come a time in the future, however, when Hashem will no longer wait for man to make the first move. Instead, as the hour of the final Redemption draws near, Hashem will take the initiative and purify the hearts of *B’nei Yisrael*, spurring them on to repentance. This is the second form of *teshuva*.

The dialogue between Hashem and *B’nei Yisrael* in the Midrash with which we began now becomes crystal clear. *B’nei Yisrael* asked Hashem to relate to them like rain. Rain stems from the earth, rises to the heavens, and then only falls intermittently. Likewise, *teshuva* is a process that begins here on Earth, initiated by man’s actions, yet capable of rising to the heavens. *B’nei Yisrael* were afraid of, and overwhelmed by, the daunting task of having to constantly initiate *teshuva*, and they therefore requested of Hashem to at least reveal Himself to them periodically, like the rain, in order to give them a reprieve from that awesome responsibility. Hashem responded by establishing an even stronger relationship with *B’nei Yisrael* than they had requested. Just like dew, which finds its source in the heavens above and is constant, He too promised them that the day will come when He will initiate the *teshuva* process from above, at the same time maintaining a continuous connection with them. This promise served to allay *B’nei Yisrael*’s concern that they would not always have the spiritual strength to initiate their own repentance.

Rav Eibeschitz further adds that while this would always be the case, there are two exceptional periods. The first, as mentioned above, will occur on the eve of the final Redemption. It is perhaps for this reason that the *B’nei Yisrael*’s request was improper, as Hashem informed them that He would be the one to initiate the relationship with B’nei Yisrael, and not vice versa. The second period reoccurs annually, during the month of Elul, when although Hashem expects B’nei Yisrael to repent and demonstrate their earnest desire for *teshuva*, His love for His people and His desire for them to succeed are so strong that He pledges “to be to Israel like the dew” which is “constantly requested and found.” This rapport has the potential to be cemented during the ensuing *Asseret Y’mei Teshuva*, the Ten Days of Repentance—the days between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur—as Rosh HaShana marks a new beginning for the entire world. We affirm this belief when we recite in the *Musaf* prayer for Rosh HaShana, “Today marks the conception of the world.” During the *Asseret Y’mei Teshuva*, Hashem is prepared to take the initiative and embrace the Jewish people in order to establish their relationship with Him anew.

In a section traditionally read as the *Haftara* by some Sephardic congregations on *Shabbat Shuva* (and by most Ashkenazic congregations on public fast days), Isaiah proclaims, “Seek Hashem when He can be found; call upon Him when He is near.”[[4]](#footnote-4) The Talmud explains that the time when Hashem is considered “near” to the Jewish people is the period between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur, a time dedicated to *teshuva*, when man becomes more cognizant of the greatness of Hashem and His kindness. It is for this reason that the Arizal (1534-1572, Jerusalem and Safed) suggested that one should treat these days as though they were days of *Hol HaMoed*, the intermediate days of the Sukkot and Pesah holidays, when one is meant to refrain from engaging in certain forms of labor in order to have more time for Torah study and to assess his connection to his Creator. Based on what we explained above, we can now better understand and appreciate the Arizal’s suggestion. May we take advantage of this opportunity to improve our relationship with Hashem.

1. Ta’anit 4a [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Yoma 38b [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Song of Songs Rabba 5:2 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Isaiah 55:6 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)