

Learning to Sit: On Teshuva and Yishuv Hada'at

by Rabbi Dr. Erin Leib Smokler, Director of Spiritual Development

Welcome to the Aseret Yimei Teshuva, the Ten Days of Repentance, that lay between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. With the month of Elul behind us and the start of the year upon us, it is time to turn up the intensity on our process of transformation. We have just a few more days before we stand in judgement before God. But how can we possibly reorient ourselves? Just what kind of transformation might we seek? Should we be born anew, what might we find on the other side? What would it actually mean to “do teshuva”?

I

The liturgy and the lore around these holidays often advances one particular model of transformation, the move from sinner to saint. Teshuva is portrayed as the process by which one may shed her iniquitous ways and find a path of pious redemption. It is a move from sin to salvation by means of confession. Rambam, for example, in his *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Teshuva, writes:

- (1) All commandments of the Torah, whether they be mandatory or prohibitive, if a person violates any one of them, either presumptuously or erroneously, when he will repent himself and turn away from his sinful way, he is obliged to confess before God, blessed is God!...
- (2) How is the verbal confession made? The sinner says thus: “I beseech Thee, O Great Name! I have sinned; I have been obstinate; I have committed profanity against Thee, particularly in doing thus and such. Now, behold! I have repented and am ashamed of my actions; forever will I not relapse into this thing again.”

He continues:

- (8) At this time, when the Temple is not established and, therefore, no altar to atone for us, there is nothing else left for us but repentance. Repentance atones for all sins....

Teshuva is presented here as the antidote to bad behavior. There seems to be a one-to-one correspondence. For every poor action there ought to be an equal and opposite positive reaction. Should this be done correctly, fully, and methodically, transformation awaits. The “evildoer” will no longer be evil. Erasure of the past is possible.

I imagine that this model resonates with some. Perhaps the work of undoing, erasing, ridding ourselves of parts of ourselves holds out hope for radical change, for fresh new beginnings. We can correct our ways and let go of regrettable mistakes.

But I also gather that it might not resonate for all. Transformation is a difficult concept. So are sin and repentance and confession. Maybe you're not looking to strip away parts of self. Maybe the negation feels aggressive, even dangerous. Maybe it doesn't accord with your theology. Maybe the calculus of bad deeds undone by good ones feels thin or a little too easy or just too unlikely.

So I'd like to consider with you an alternative to this view of transformation—a view that is softer, gentler, kinder. A view that, I will argue, very much speaks to our moment in time. This view emerges from a more mystical Chasidic tradition and it turns on the meanings embedded in the word teshuva.

Though translated as “repentance” by many, as we've seen, teshuva contains within it the root for *leishev*, to sit or to settle. Not to undo or strip away, but to find calm and ease. To rest in, what Rebbe Nachman (among others) called, *yishuv hada'at*, the quieting of the mind. The state of sin, thus construed, is not wickedness. It's unsettled-ness. It's anxiety, overwhelm, discomfort, restlessness, fear. It's the constriction in your chest when you can't stop asking ‘what if...?’ It's the sleeplessness at night when you can't stop wondering what will be. It's the buzz that accompanies you more often than you'd like that doesn't let you relax. It's the ping in your pocket that distracts; the newsfeed that floods you; the headlines that grab you. It's the flutter in your heart that keeps you hyper-alert and continuously afraid. Perhaps the spiritual work of our time—this fraught cultural moment of political, social, and environmental rupture—is to find a settling. To transform not from sinners to saints, but to move from dis-ease to ease, from chaos to inner calm. It is this dynamic that I would like to explore here.

II

Let us begin with Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook (1865-1935) who wrote about this phenomenon in his work *Olat Reiyah*:

All sin prevents *yishuv hada'at* (the settling of the mind), which is required to illuminate the secrets of the world. Teshuva opens the gates of understanding (*bina*), just as it comes through understanding (*Olat Reiyah*, Yom Kippur 8).

Rav Kook wrote a lot about teshuva. He wrote a whole book about it, *Orot HaTeshuva*, *The Lights of Teshuva*, which we will look at in a moment. But for now, just note his conception of sin, or waywardness. It is not a specific action done wrong, but an orientation to life that keeps one from seeing. It is that which keeps us from serenity; that which disquiets the soul and disrupts the mind. Sin is all that throws us off balance, all that compromises our sense of equilibrium. It is anxiety, angst, the dread that weighs on us and encumbers us.

Rav Kook describes the kind of teshuva—settling—that is called for to meet this challenge of unsettledness.

...And there is another feeling of general, non-specified, teshuva. No sin or sins of the past enter his awareness, but in general he feels within himself that he is very much oppressed, that he is filled with sin, that the light of God is not shining on him. There is no willing spirit within him. His heart is sealed...[I]t is as though he is completely manacled. From the midst of this bitter feeling of his spirit, teshuva comes like the bandage of an expert healer... A powerful trust in healing, in the general revival that teshuva offers to all who cling to it, causes

a spirit of favor and grace to pass over him. “Like a person whose mother comforts him, so will I comfort you” (Isaiah 66:13). He feels this...[H]e has been re-created as a new being, with whom the entire world and all worlds have been renewed...(Orot HaTeshuva, Chapter 3).

For Rav Kook, ever the poet and mystic, “general, non-specified teshuva” begins with an undifferentiated spiritual malaise and ends with comfort or wholeness. Sin is that which keeps a person feeling trapped and “manacled”—uncomfortable, inauthentic, maybe depressed. But “teshuva comes like the bandage of an expert healer,” he says, to mend the broken heart and soothe the troubled mind. It holds a person together within a loving maternal embrace.

The method by which one gets there is admittedly circular. It is through trust in the possibility of healing that one may be healed. And trust in God and God’s tools. It is those who, despite their discomfort, believe that they may yet be comforted, and avail themselves to it, who ultimately are so blessed. This is the transformation from constriction to calm that teshuva offers.

III

Rebbe Nachman of Breslav (1772-1810), who long pre-dated Rav Kook, also wrote much on this theme. Beautifully tying teshuva to yishuv hada’at and to the sounds of the shofar, he claimed:

In the middle we blow a blast that is a teruah and shevarim [which represent] moans and whimpers, as our sages say [in BT Rosh Hashanah 33b]. This is like what a person must do all of their life to strengthen and transform all kinds of sadness, that are like moans and whimpers, into happiness. This is the essence of teshuva that comes through yishuv da’at that itself comes through happiness (*Likkutei Halachot*, Orach Chaim, Laws of Thanksgiving Blessings 6: 71:1).

For Rebbe Nachman, the core of teshuva is yishuv hada’at which comes through simcha, or joy. The cries of the shofar—its moans and whimpers—stand in for the cries of our souls that we strive to transform through happiness. These symbolic sounds, which accompany us through Elul and then boldly stand at the center of our High Holiday experiences, are a call not to repent (as Rambam would have it), but an invitation to overcome psychic pain through the assertion—the laborious, active assertion—of joy. This work, the transformation of suffering into celebration, is the work of teshuva.

In his book *Likkutei MoHaRaN* (Tanina 10), Rebbe Nachman expands on these ideas and offers a program for how to use joy to settle the mind. He writes:

The sole reason that people are distant from God and do not draw closer to God is that they lack yishuv hada’at and fail to settle their mind. It is essential that a person strive to reflect on the purpose of all the desires and distractions of this world. This includes the desires which

are bound up with the body and also the non-physical desires, such as [for] honor. Then he will surely return to God (*Likutei Moharan*, Part II: 10:1).

Disquiet within the self causes us much pain and alienation, says Rebbe Nachman. But it is within our power to settle our minds through reflection and re-orientation. We can interrogate our anxieties and refocus our attention. We can let go of foolish hungers that just cause us hurt.

He continues:

(2) But know depression makes it impossible to direct the mind the way one wants. It is therefore difficult for a person to attain yishuv hada'at. Only joy enables him to direct the mind as he pleases and attain yishuv hada'at. This is because joy is the realm of freedom, as in "For through joy you will go out" (Isaiah 55:12). Through joy a person becomes free and goes out of exile...

(3) The way to get to joy is to find within oneself (at least) one point of goodness as in the explanation of the verse "I will sing to God with the little I have left" (Psalms 146:2) (*Likutei Moharan*, Part II: 10:2-3).

The way into yishuv hada'at is through joy, an experience that Rebbe Nachman identifies with freedom. How might we liberate ourselves? By looking deep within ourselves and locating even a scintilla of strength, we might begin to build a more solid sense of self, he argues. Our challenge is to excavate our souls, to look inward, to locate our anchors, our points of solidity and power. When we can add one point to another, one note to another, we can slowly build our song, finding happiness and harmony again, finding calm.

IV

The models of teshuva offered by Rav Kook and Rebbe Nachman foreground trust, belief, joy, and inner strength as the keys to transformation. It seems that if we can work hard enough to overcome negative thinking, we just might think our way out of our existential anxiety. But to fully experience yishuv hada'at, I wonder if we might actually need to cultivate another skill set. We might need to learn how to sit, *leishev*—how to sit with unease; how to stay with discomfort; how to rest in uncertainty. We might need to find a way to ground ourselves in shifty sands.

Learning to sit requires practice. Lots and lots of practice. Meditation, which often takes place in that very posture, both performs and invites these very skills. Through the act of sitting, mindfully and deliberately, one can learn to settle. Perhaps this is the kind of yeshiva (sitting) that we ought to seek through our teshuva.

V

I'd like to close by reflecting on a Biblical character who was known for sitting, and that is Yaacov, paradoxically our struggling forefather.

We are introduced to Yaacov through this very (in)action: “And Yaacov was an innocent man, dwelling (“yoshev”) in tents” (Genesis 25:27). Unlike his brother Esav who favored the fields, Yaacov was a quiet man who sat. Perhaps he was a homebody, favoring domestic life. Or perhaps, as the midrash says, he was a yeshiva boy, studying in the beit midrash of Shem and Ever. But there is yet another interpretation of this praiseworthy form of dwelling, found in Kabbalistic literature, that focuses on where it took place. Yaacov is presented as a person seated between two tents, the tent of Avraham and the tent of Yitzchak, between the powers of chesed (lovingkindness) and din (judgement).

R. Yosef Gikatilla, a 13th century Spanish Kabbalist, puts this beautifully in his book *Shaarei Orah*:

“And Yaacov was an innocent man, dwelling in tents.” This is to say that Yaacov represents the middle way. Like the tie of the lulav that holds the two sides [of hadasim and aravot] together in the middle, so Yaacov held together two tents, the tent of Avraham, which was one of chesed, and the tent of Yitzchak, which was one of din. This is the secret of “And Yaacov was an innocent man, dwelling in tents.” For what reason did the text use [the plural] “tents”? It should have said that he dwelled in a [single] tent. This teaches that Yaacov's essential characteristic was to stand [or sit] between two tents and to hold them together, the right and the left, such that Avraham and Yitzchak were bound together in him (*Shaarei Orah*, Shaar 5, Sefirah 6).

Yaacov, known as the consummate struggler, was actually, at his core, a quiet, inward, integrated balancer. He existed between competing pulls, varied ways of being, conflicting legacies, turmoil with God and with human beings. And he sat between them. He held paradox, united opposites, and maintained trusting commitment, even when it left him wounded and limping. The yishuv hada'at, the inner peace, that Yaacov cultivated from his earliest days was hardly a simple complaisance. It was a dynamic striving toward integration, toward a “yeshiva,” a stillness precariously and preciously perched between camps.

And so we might see from here that “sitting,” alas, in any form is not easy and it is not static.

It is not carefree and simple-minded. It is not a complete release from all that is weighty. Instead it is a dynamic way of being in the world that holds tension and rests gently within it, that exists between the pulls of the world and stays centered amidst it all. As children of Yaacov, Bnei Yisrael, we might strive to live in the light of this legacy.

During this season of heightened teshuva, we repeatedly beseech the Divine: “Hashiveinu Hashem eilekha v'nashuva, chadesh yameinu k'kedem—Return us, O God, and we will return. Renew our days as of old” (Eicha 5:21). In the spirit of all that we have explored—whether we are literally meditating or figuratively sitting in the songs and words of the age-old liturgy; whether we are beating our breasts or gently holding

our broken hearts—we add: Settle us, O God, and we will settle. Calm us, O God, and we will be calmed. Help us to slow down. Help us to rest. Help us to hold the center between the tents. Through our teshuva, help us to truly find yishuv hada'at. May it be so.

Rabbi Dr. Erin Leib Smokler is the Director of Spiritual Development at Yeshivat Maharat, where she teaches Hasidism and Pastoral Torah. Rabbi Dr. Leib Smokler earned both her PhD and MA from the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought and her BA from Harvard University. She was ordained by Yeshivat Maharat. Erin previously served as Assistant Literary Editor of The New Republic magazine, and her writing has appeared there, as well as in The New York Times Book Review, The Jewish Week, and other publications. She won the 2021 National Jewish Book Award in Modern Jewish Thought and Experience for her collection, Torah in a Time of Plague: Historical and Contemporary Jewish Reflections (Ben Yehudah Press).