Jewish Tribune – Yom Kippur

**Twist and Turn**

Elazar ben Durdaya is one of the most famous ba’alei teshuva in history. Having strayed from the path of Jewish life, he epitomised lustful abandonment, travelling the world and spending vast sums in attempt to satisfy his desires.

The Gemoro (Avoda Zara 17a) tells that he was inspired to change his ways in the most unlikely of circumstances. Embarrassed by his life choices and burning with new motivation to change, Elazar ben Durdaya does teshvua.

Initially, he seeks help from the world around him. He beseeches the mountains and hills, heaven and earth, the sun and the moon to ask Hashem to have mercy on him. His pleas were denied. Finally, he realises אין הדבר תלוי אלא בי - it all depends on me, the responsibility is totally mine and he must approach his Creator directly.

Ridden with shame and wearing the most complete of attires – a broken heart – he places his head between his knees in a posture of intense teshuvah and cries himself to death. Immediately, a bas kol, a Heavenly voice, proclaims: “Rebbe Eliezer ben Durdaya is worthy of eternal life!”

The Gemoro continues that when this incident was reported to Rabbi Yehudah Hanassi, he was deeply moved and tearfully declared: “יש קונה עולמו בכמה שנים – there are those who acquire their world (to come) with many years of work,ויש קונה עולמו בשעה אחת and there are those who acquire their world in in one brief moment.”

As the Rambam writes (Hilchos Teshuva 1,3): אפילו רשע כל ימיו ועשה תשובה באחרונה אין מזכירין לו שום דבר מרשעו - even if is wicked all his days, if he did teshuva at the end, nothing of his wickedness is mentioned.

The Oros HaTeshuva (perek 16) writes:

יסודה של התשובה במקורה נאמר עליו: "כגבה שמים על הארץ גבר חסדו על יראיו, כרחק מזרח ממערב הרחיק ממנו את פשעינו".

The foundation of teshuvah is rooted in the possuk (Tehillim 103,12) “As distant as east is from west, He has distanced our transgressions from us.”

Rabbi Judah Mischel in his sefer “Baderech” (p21-23) quotes the above and notes that seemingly, east and west could not be further from each other. But in fact, the question of distance between east and west in unquantifiable and therefore irrelevant.

If so, what does Dovid Hamelech mean when he said: כרחק מזרח ממערב הרחיק ממנו את פשעינו - as distant as east is from west, He has distanced our transgressions from us?

Rabbi Mischel explains that when we change the direction of our life with a 180-degree turn, Hashem removes all meaning from our past negativity.

He brings a beautiful proof in the name of the Maggid of Mezeritch.

שעה - sha’ah is a unit of time, namely an hour. However, the word also means to “turn”, as in וַיִּשַׁע ה' אֶל הֶבֶל וְאֶל מִנְחָתֽוֹ וְאֶל קַיִן וְאֶל מִנְחָתוֹ לֹא שָׁעָה - And G-d turned to Hevel and his gift, and to Kayin and his gift, He did not turn (sha’ah) (Bereishis 4, 4-5).

Rabbi Mischel quotes the language of the Zohar: “בשעתא חדא וברגעה חדא – in one moment” a person can change the trajectory of his life.

Reb Levi Yitzchak Bender interpreted it, “Mit ein drei – With one ‘turn’, iz her shoin a ba’al teshuvah – one is already a ba’al teshuva.”

We can now understand Rabbi Yehudah Hanassi’s emotion and re-interpret his comment: יש קונה עולמו בשעה אחת – to mean that “there are those who acquire their world with one turn.” He was teaching that Elozor ben Durdaya was able to turn his life’s trajectory around as if turning from east to west. All it took was one turn. In a moment of self-awareness and transformational intent, a single wholehearted pivotal choice made him the paragon of teshuva.

Rabbi Mischel describes teshuvah as a spiritual realignment that restores the original “factory default setting” of who we are. “אֱלֹקַי נְשָׁמָה שֶׁנָּתַתָּ בִּי טְהוֹרָה הִיא - Hashem, the soul You have placed in me is pure!” we declare and optimistically remind ourselves every morning. The truth of the matter is, nothing external can change this reality.

It can only be temporarily suppressed or covered over. We are like the innovative “Shabbos lamp”, the light bulb is on, but when it is covered, it appears to be extinguished. A simple turn of the cylindrical cover reveals brilliant light.

All we have to do is turn. A small twist of the cover will reveal our unchanged brilliance.

Wishing all readers a gmar chasima tova.

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