

Shabbos Shuvah

Guilt, Time, Repentance, and the Future

Guilt is a terrible thing. It can twist and distort us and cause us to destroy ourselves. How can we get rid of it? How can we possibly undo the things that we have done? After all, isn't the past past? How can we change the past and make it different? How can we ever rid ourselves of our burden, of our guilt from the past? It is true *vis a vis* other people that time is linear, that what is past is past and that in order for us to rid ourselves of at least part of our guilt we have to try to make amends to the person whom we have wronged. However, *vis a vis* ourselves and our own consciousness time is not linear. In our mind, in our consciousness time, the past, the future, and the present all intertwine. Many times we will see something which will remind us of something from our past which will remind us of something else from the past which will remind us of a future anticipated event which will bring us back to the present and then back to the past again. Time in our minds is fluid and moves back and forth. Many times, especially, when the High Holiday season arrives, we will remember something our grandparents told us which we hope to apply in a future time to a grandchild when he becomes *Bar Mitzvah* and then we will think how we can use this thought right now. Our stream of consciousness is not time bound. We constantly use the past to direct us toward our future, and we constantly use our future goals to reemphasize and even revise our past. We are constantly revising the way we relate to our past.

We see this in Israel today where just two short years ago the settlers on the barren government owned land in Judah and Samaria and the Golan were looked on as heroes by 90% of the Israeli population. They were modern day *Chalutzim* who were making Israel more secure. They settled in desolate places without electricity or running water and endured many privations until they were finally connected to the national electric grid and the national water carrier. They were Israel's first line of defense. Now everything has changed. To a great many people in Israel they are now the enemies of peace, the greatest impediment toward the reconciliation of the Arabs to the State of Israel. The past has not changed but the attitude of the Israeli government toward it has. Since the change of government in Israel

there has been a radical shift in which the Israeli government now thinks is necessary for its security and future growth. The past has not changed, the sacrifices that the settlers have endured has not changed, but the attitude of the government toward these sacrifices and for the necessity of these sacrifices has changed.

When it comes to the past, we can use it as a tool to teach us how to be better, or we can use it as an excuse to avoid our responsibilities and a reason to wallow in self pity and despair. The concept of *teshuva*, repentance, teaches us how we must use our past. We must always use our past as a learning device which will allow us to spring forward to a brighter and better future. One of the names of *Rosh Hashona* is *Yom Hazikaron*, the Day of Memory. One of the three additions to the *Mussaf* prayer on *Rosh Hashona* is called *Zichronos*, which means memories. On *Yom Kippur* throughout the many *Selichos* prayers we say we constantly appeal to G-d to remember the covenant with our forefathers. We are constantly referring to "Our G-d and the G-d of our forefathers to pardon and forgive our iniquities on this Day of Atonement." Memory is crucial if we are to do *teshuva*. The rabbis teach us that the difference between the old and the young is that the old concentrate on the past while the young concentrate on the future. The old are filled with recollections while the young are filled with anticipations. In Jewish life we are commanded to be both young and old at the same time. We are commanded to look toward the future but to make sure that that future is based on our past.

The two additional sections to the *Mussaf Rosh Hashona* services also teach us how to do *teshuva*. The *Malchuyos* section states that we have the power to change our past, not obviously the past, itself, but the way we relate to our past. The *Zichronos* section, which we have already mentioned, tells us that we have a past that we cannot ignore, and the *Shofros* section teaches us that we must always look toward the future, toward the end of days when the world will be filled with justice and loving kindness, where there will be peace and harmony and brotherhood, "when wickedness will vanish like smoke and when the rule of tyranny will be abolished from the earth." We are commanded to learn from our mistakes, not to dwell on them. We have to strive to rectify what we have done wrong in the past and not run from our past. Even though at times our

guilt may be unbearable, we can overcome it. We can turn it (that's what *teshuva* means) to a force for good.

We can relate to our past in three different ways. We can ignore it and pretend that the bad things that we did we did not do and try to forget them. This will never work. This just leaves us with a festering wound which will never heal. It will sap our energies and prevent us from doing the good things we are capable of. It will prevent us from assuming our rightful responsibilities and it will many times drive us to live in a make believe world where we will not have to face our problems.

The second way we can face our guilt is to recognize the wrongs we have done and determine never to do them again by separating ourselves completely from our past. We do not deny our past, but we will have nothing at all to do with our past. Any relationships or special skills that we have developed in our past we will abjure, we will have nothing to do with them. We are afraid that the pitfalls of the past will cause us to sin again and, therefore, we want to avoid any contact with them so that this will not happen.

There is a third way of dealing with guilt and that is to acknowledge our guilt but not to break with our past, to acknowledge that we have done wrong but to use this knowledge as a motivating factor to cause us to do better in the future. In the *Gemora Yoma* Resh Lokesh makes two seemingly contradictory statements in close proximity one to the other. In the first statement he says that when we do *teshuva*, our intentional sins are now counted as unintentional sins, while in the second statement Resh Lokesh says that when we do *teshuva* our intentional sins now become merits. The *Talmud* explains that the first statement refers to a person who does *teshuva* out of fear while the second refers to a person who does *teshuva* out of love. In the first instance the fear of repeating the sin is so great that the sinner wants to keep far away from his past and have nothing to do with it. He does not try to forget it or pretend it does not exist, but he is so fearful that he will repeat his sin that he wants to stay as far away as he possibly can from his past. In the second instance the sinner acknowledges his sin and wishes never to repeat it, but he also wishes to learn from his past to change the way he relates to his past so that his remorse for what he has done will cause him to correct any deficiencies he has now in

the present and cause him to have a better future. He also wants to take from the past the energies that he once utilized for evil and now use them for good. This also explains why *Tisha B'Av* is considered a holiday in the Jewish calendar. *Tisha B'Av* is a day of doom and gloom. It is known as a black fast, yet it is also a holiday because by observing *Tisha B'Av*, we learn about what caused the destruction of the Temple, and we learn never to repeat those terrible sins, the sin of senseless hatred, of violence between Jews, etc., which can only lead to destruction. We also learn to take the negative energies which led to the destruction of our Temple and use them positively now to build our community and Israel.

In all our *Mussaf* prayers, even the *Mussaf* on *Rosh Hashona* and *Yom Kippur*, we say "because of our sins we were exiled from our land." The past is a motivating force in allowing us to look to the future. Recollection of the past causes us to spring forward to the future with renewed energies. Learning from our past mistakes causes us to work harder to ensure for us all a better future. Guilt can: (1) either be ignored; or (2) acknowledged but put at a distance; or (3) acknowledged and used as a basis for giving us a better life. If we will always face squarely who we are and what we have done and resolve to use our energies and remorse to build a better future, then we can rid ourselves of our guilt totally and turn it into a positive force. We should not dwell on our guilt. We instead should use it to cause us to build a better future.

We also learn that on *Rosh Hashona* Joseph was freed from prison. Joseph was a great dreamer. He always looked to the future. His problem was that he also did not look to the past, and he was not sensitive to others. He was not concerned at all about other people's dreams or about how his dreams would affect other people. He caused one tragedy after another. He provoked his brothers' jealousy; he caused himself to be sold into slavery; he caused his father much heartache. However, once he learned to be sensitive to the dreams and needs of others and how to relate positively to his past, he became a great man. He never gave up his dreams. He always knew that the Jewish people would be redeemed from Egypt, but he always, after he learned to relate to his past and to listen to the dreams of others, became sensitive to other people. He was able to convert his past into a glorious future by the way he reacted to it. He could have been very

vengeful with his brothers. He could have let his family starve. He could have become a totally assimilated Egyptian. After all, he was the second most powerful person in Egypt, but he chose not to do any of these things. He acknowledged that he also was guilty. He was obviously not the only one who was guilty but his insensitivity to his brothers caused a lot of the problems in his family. He did not turn his back on his past behavior, though. He acknowledged his past but he used his past to help forge a stronger family. It was he who changed the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob into the Sons of Israel, a might nation in Egypt.

None of us need let our guilt overwhelm us. We can rid ourselves of our guilt if we will, like Joseph, react to our past positively, not by denying our guilt but by embracing our guilt and using it as a way of improving ourselves and working toward a better future. Let us hope that we will all do this so we all will be worthy of a *Shana Tova*. On behalf of myself, my wife, and our family we wish you all a New Year in which we will all know only good health and good things, a New Year in which peace will reign in Israel and throughout the world, and a New Year in which we will all be able to overcome our guilt.