

Tikkun Shovavim *The Rectification of the Six Weeks*

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Shovavim is the Hebrew term for mischief-makers. Fittingly, the word is also an acronym for the six weekly Torah portions **S**hemot, **V**aera, **B**o, **B**eshelah, **Y**itro and **M**ishpatim. The reading of these portions fall within the two Hebrew months of Tevet and Shevat. This period is considered auspicious for fasting and the rectification of the sins of character weakness (most notably sexual sins).

There are many different types of traditions associated with these weeks, yet they are all for similar purpose, this being teshuva and tikkun. The general sin, which almost everyone is guilty of, is one form or another of sexual impropriety. This can mean forbidden relations or behaviors on one's own part, or even the mere thoughts that we allow ourselves to think.

Our Sages and especially the Masters of the Kabbalah emphasize that sexual blemishes are the greatest stains upon the soul and serve to create great distance between our Creator and ourselves. Yet, it is never enough just to proclaim our remorse or desire to repent. A change of attitude must accompany our statements of remorse. Repentance must be taken to heart and acted upon with true sincerity, not just filed away as a mere academic performance.

Honest change in one's internal character only comes about when one first changes one's external behavior. Change seldom arises independently from within; we must often help it along. We are admonished by Rabbi Meir in Pirkei Avot to do the right thing, even for the wrong reasons, for in the end doing the right thing, even for the wrong reasons will transform us internally to do the right thing for the right reasons. The actions change the attitude, not the other way around.

As important as it is for one to change one's behavior, changing attitudes is most important. Even when we are doing the right things, we must still look deep within ourselves to address our improper attitudes and desires. Comprehensively changing what one does can only come about through a cultivation and expression of inner strength, discipline and moral character. Remorse and apologies mean nothing so long as one continues to repeat offensive behavior. Shovavim is a time for us to not only change undesirable behavior but also to reflect within one's heart upon the reasons why one has

chosen wanton ways and what one can do to better oneself to no longer weakly choose to embrace foolish choices.

Teshuva means to turn away from one's wanton behavior and to choose what is good. Tikkun takes this one step further. Tikkun means to repair. It is not enough that one no longer create further damage, one must also make repair of the damage that one has already caused. This is the meaning of taking responsibility for one's actions. Only when one does what need be done to make repairs for what one has broken can it be said that one indeed has turned from their former ways and has made teshuva.

Rectification of sexual blemishes must be accomplished in two different ways. First, one must repair the spiritual damage caused by one's deeds. This is done by reciting certain prayers, meditations and by fasting. The second, yet primary method of rectification is that one must address one's personal weaknesses and character flaws that led one to stumble into the forbidden behavior in the first place. Unless one learns strength of character and addresses the heart of the problem within oneself, no amount of spiritual work will make tikkun.

To state it simply, unless one can first rectify the source of blemish within one's character, the results of those blemishes in both the physical and spiritual world cannot be rectified and wiped clean. Let no one misunderstand this, for our entire Torah is based upon this principle.

Concerning traditional observances of this period, one of the most popular is the observance of fasting. Torah tradition defines a fast as total abstinence from any and all food and drink (including water) from the moment of dawn (when the rays of the sun are first seen on the horizon) until dusk, (when the last rays of the sun fall below the horizon). During these winter months, when the days are short, such a fast day may only last for ten or so hours. As such, a fast of such brevity is relatively easy for most and therefore can be observed by many.

While abstaining from food and drink is one way of showing one's remorse for wanton behavior, the fast also serves another more spiritual purpose. The burning of body fat is considered an offering of oneself to G-d. Thus, the concept of fasting as being an offering to G-d has more than just symbolic meaning. What was offered as sacrifice on the ancient Temple altar was the fat and blood of the animal. When we fast, our bodies are still naturally burning calories. There is no intake of food to replenish what is burned up, and, as is medically known, what is burned up first is usually the fat. Therefore, by fasting, the natural fire of one's body burns one's fat (and thus blood along with it). One's fasting, therefore, is not just symbolically, but an actual offering of fat and blood just as it was on the ancient altar.

During the six-week period, the tradition has developed to fast on the Mondays and Thursdays (the days when the Torah is read in the Synagogue; fasting is not acceptable on the Shabat). Therefore, for the six weeks, for two days each week (for a total of twelve days), one will fast from dawn until dusk (as described above). Yet, the mere abstinence from food and drink is not enough. The fast must be focused and performed as a means of mini-atonement for one's blemishes. This focus is brought about through the special prayers and meditations performed on these days.

There are a number of special Shovavim prayer books available that have a full array of prayers. This is neither the time nor place to enumerate these practices. Please contact your local Jewish bookseller if you are interested in acquiring a copy. The traditional Sephardic Shovavim prayer book is entitled **Marpeh L'Nefesh (To Heal the Soul)**. This book will outline for you the various prayers and other traditions of this period.

During this period there is also observed a special type of fast called a Ta'anit Dibbur. This is not a fast from food and drink; it is a fast from speaking. The tradition has evolved that for one day, from dawn till dusk, one does not speak any superfluous speech. Rather, one speaks only the words of one's daily prayers, and that is all. The day is passed doing something that is considered to be a very powerful spiritual tool for rectifying one's sins. Usually observed on a Shabat, after morning prayers and breakfast, the entire congregation gathers in the Synagogue to perform the special tikkun.

The special Tikkun of the Ta'anit Dibbur is the recitation of the entire book of Psalm (all 150 of them), three times (for a total reading of 450 Psalms). The entire congregation reads all the Psalms, they are not divided up. This reading, at an average pace will take almost ten hours. This takes up the entire day. The readings begin after breakfast and should end in time for afternoon Minha prayers. In the traditional Shovavim prayer books, there are also additional prayers recited both before and after the readings centered on the matters of the day.

The months of Tevet and Shevat when Shovavim occur are said to be astrological times of difficulty for the Jewish people in general. These months are a type of astrological "Murphy's Law" period, meaning that if there is a given opportunity for something to go wrong, it will, and at the worse possible time. This does not mean in any way that things are destined to go wrong during this time and that we have no control over matters. Those with knowledge of true astrology as defined by Torah know that astrological influences only reveal potentials, but can never predict anything actual. Anyone using astrology to

predict violates the Torah commands of idolatry. Nothing is set and definite in life other than the Will of HaShem.

Tevet and Shevat exert a negative astrological influence, but this force of negativity (dinim) can only become manifest if and when one's reckless behavior creates a doorway for it to materialize. If we act in ways that violate Holy Torah, we create the opportunity for negative things to manifest, in the worst of ways, in this most negative of times. Therefore, if something bad happens now, it is not because Heaven ordained it so, but rather because we were not careful enough to have avoided its coming.

In conclusion, how one chooses to observe the days of Shovavim is entirely up to the individual. There are absolutely no Halakhic requirements herein, other than the perennial mitzvah of teshuva. Yet, although one is not necessarily obligated to observe the traditions of this time, it is still a wise, meritorious and spiritually helpful thing to do. One should consult with one's local Rav for specific information and details what you as an individual can do and what your community as a whole can do.

If your Rav is not Sephardi or is not educated in the traditional Sephardi ways, he may not be familiar with all the Shovavim traditions. Do not let him off the hook, or tell you not to pay attention to Shovavim traditions. Shovavim traditions are not observed exclusively by Sephardim; a number of Hasidim also are aware of the importance of these days and guard them wisely. Make your local Rav do his homework, and direct you and your congregation in the ways of public communal Shovavim teshuva. In this way, we all draw together as a body, and we assist one another in change. Most important we bring tikkun to ourselves and to the community at large and help bring the coming of Mashiah ever closer.

Whether or not your community will adopt Shovavim traditions, you as an individual should. Whether or not one can fast depends on many factors. Just remember, the fast is a means to an end and not an end unto itself. A fast is supposed to assist us in focusing on the important factors within ourselves that need to be addressed and changed. One can do this without fasting.

From a Kabbalistic point of view, fasting certainly helps refine the soul and atone for one's sins. One who is able to conduct one's daily affairs regularly while fasting should do so. Yet, while fasting brings teshuva, tikkun is only achieved by change; real change of behavior and real internal change of attitude. During these days of Shovavim, focus on change.