

Shovavim - Rectifying Sexual Transgression

Contributed by Rabbi Shmuel Eliahu
Monday, 16 December 2013
Last Updated Monday, 16 December 2013

Every week, Israel's former Chief Rabbi, HaRav Rav Mordechai Eliahu, of blessed memory, put out a Torah bulletin for Shabbat, called "Kol Tzofiyech," which is distributed to synagogues throughout the country. Since the Rabbi's death, his sons are continuing to put out the bulletin. This one focuses on "Shovavim," the special period of the year most conducive to rectifying the stains of sexual transgression.

Rabbi Eliahu was one of the outstanding halachic authorities in Israel. During his prolonged illness, his son, Rabbi Shmuel Eliahu, the Chief Rabbi of Safed, delivered the weekly televised lecture upon which the Torah bulletin is based. The recent lecture is on the six-week period of "Shovavim" which begins this week. We can see from the importance that Rabbi Eliahu places on "Shovavim" that it is not something limited to Kabbalists, or a few fringe Hasidic communities, but an important and worthwhile practice for Jews everywhere.

May the learning of the laws and customs of "Shovavim" that we are translating (in a condensed version) from the bulletin, bring a blessing on the memory of the beloved and revered Rabbi Eliahu and bring a blessing of health to all of the ailing people in Israel. Amen.

(Excerpted from the bulletin)

PURIFICATION FROM THE POLLUTION OF EGYPT

During the next six Torah readings, we will be re-experiencing the liberation of the Jewish People from the exile Egypt and from the 49th level of impurity to which we had sunk, to the great elevation of reaching the 49th level of purity and the 50th gate with the giving of the Torah. The revered Sage, the Shlah HaKadosh, states that this period is a time of intensified tshuva for the Jewish People, as our earlier and later Sages have written. The hardships which we suffered in Egypt came to cleanse us in the purifying furnace of the exile. So too today, during the "Shovavim" period, we strive for a greater purity from the transgressions which have blemished our souls. The famous Kabbalist, the Arizal, states that the Shovavim period comes to purify us particularly from sexual transgressions, known as blemishes to the Brit. It is thus a period in rectification, known as "Tikun HaBrit."

Just as every year on Pesach we are called to look upon ourselves as if we too had escaped from Egypt, we are also called upon to cleanse ourselves of the terrible impurity that characterized Egypt's immoral culture. In the time of Moshe, there were people who protested against the holy lifestyle that the newly-formed Nation of Israel was called upon to lead. They longed to return to the immorality of Egypt, and in fact, were not permitted to travel on to the Holy Land. These people cried in the doorways of their tents over the Torah laws which restricted sexual conduct to married couples only. They didn't want to give up the immoral practices of Egypt's perverted culture.

This same immoral culture spread out from Egypt over the world and its influences are very prevalent until this day. The dominion of the nations of the world over Israel stems from this sordid source, and only when we expel this polluted culture from our midst, will Israel gain its rightful prominence. Sexual immorality was the mainstay of Egyptian culture - men married men, and women married women, and one woman took two husbands (Rambam, Laws of Illicit Sexual Relations, 21:8). This licentious behavior is what the Torah means when it tells us: "Do not conduct yourselves after the doings of the land of Egypt" (Vayikra, 18:3). And this is the moral, physical, and spiritual pollution that we are to purify ourselves from during the weeks of Shovavim, both men and women alike.

Twice each day, in the paragraph of the Shema dealing with tzitzit, we say that Hashem took us out of Egypt to sanctify us, with special emphasis on our hearts and eyes: "Thou shall not follow after your heart and your eyes which lead you astray." After your heart is referring to thoughts of sexual licentiousness. After your eyes refers to seeing forbidden images. For these things impair a person's holiness and go against the goal of our leaving Egypt — to become a holy nation dedicated to serving Hashem.

STEP ONE - TIKUN AGAINST INTERNET POLLUTION

The great Sage, the Orach HaChaim HaKadosh, explains why this cleansing is dependent on guarding one's eyes and one's thoughts. "It is known that all of the commandments which Hashem has given to His holy nation are matters that we can do and which follow after the will to do them. One exception is separating oneself from illicit sexual conduct which a man's nature pulls him toward with an overpowering lust if he doesn't guard himself from two matters: seeing sexually inciting images and thinking sexual thoughts. If a man doesn't guard himself from these two things, he cannot overcome and escape the ruling passions that stem from them. And if he tastes even a little of this poison, he will be a slave to his lusts" (on Vayikra, 18:2).

One of the greatest dangers today of falling prey to these base passions is via the Internet. Thus, the first rectification during the days of Shovavim is to rectify this damaging agent. If someone has Internet in his home and does not have a filter that prevents entering forbidden sites, and seeing erotic images, he or she must correct this immediately before any other tikun. This includes cancelling access to Internet via cell phones. Everyone must make sure that these steps are taken. Everyone! Today and not tomorrow!

TIKUN HABRIT

Our Sages explain that the bondage in Egypt began when the Jews stopped guarding the commandment of brit milah. The tribe of Levi, who continued to safeguard the covenant of the Brit, were not subjected to slavery in Egypt (Ramban, Yevamot 46). Thus the Jews were not redeemed from Egypt until they performed the Brit of circumcision on the eve of their departure (Shemot Rabbah 19). This shows that safeguarding the Brit is a key factor in personal and national redemption.

RECTIFYING PAST WRONGDOING

Many times men and women come to me (Rabbi Shmuel Eliahu) requesting a tikun (rectification) for sexual wrongs which they committed in the past. I asked my father and teacher, shlita, (Rabbi Mordechai Eliahu) for his guidance, and he told me to counsel these people to take upon themselves to fast each year once or twice, or to undertake a fast of not speaking (taanit debor), during the Shovavim period for the rest of their lives. In truth, the tikun is different for each person, since sexual wrongdoings differ from person to person. There are those who succumbed to forbidden thoughts, and others who committed forbidden deeds. There are baale tshuva who erred, and observant Jews who erred, which is far graver. There are those who committed serious transgressions, and those who committed even worse prohibitions. Some people committed one wrongdoing, while others committed many. Some people committed sins privately by themselves, and some brought others to sin with them. Thus the tikun differs from one person to the next, depending on the level of the person and the level of his sin.

The literature of the Kabbalah indicates that these tikunim (rectifications) must be effected through many difficult fasts. My father and teacher, shlita, is far more lenient. He says that the main remedy is the tikun of Shovavim, which is conducted in several fashions. There is the learning about "tikun habrit" (rectifying sexual infractions), there

are special prayers for tikun habit, there are fasts from eating, and there are fasts from speaking. My father and teacher, shilta (may he live a good and lengthy life), says that someone who has done a tikun one year should undertake the tikun every year, as it says, “my sins are before me always.”

The reason my father, HaRav, is lenient in this matter is because this period is a time of repentance, and it is proper to be lenient with baale tshuva. In addition, the Master of the World assists in the tikun. It is Hashem who circumcises our hearts and the hearts of our children. During Shovavim, the gates of Heaven are open.

[ED. Note: It is important to note that the Kabbalists Rabbi Eliahu Leon Levi and Rabbi David Basri consider the recital of special prayers of repentance, known as “Tikun HaYesod,” as essential to the rectification process. See the related article on Shovavim: <http://www.jewishsexuality.com/whos-afraid-of-the-big-bad-wolf>

END TO GLUTTONY

The book “Magid Maisharim” relates that our teacher, Rabbi Yosef Caro (compiler of the “Shulchan Aruch”) would take it upon himself to fast during the period of Shovavim. Once, the angel, “HaMagid,” who spoke with him, exhorted him to be strong in this resolve, telling him: “Know that the evil inclination, which is the Serpent, and its agents, are constantly pursuing you, and their desire is toward you, but you can overcome them. You have undertaken to fast during these weeks of Shovavim and a fast during this period is desirous in Heaven and highly accepted.”

Furthermore, he warned him not to overeat during the night between one daytime fast and the next, and not to eat out of pleasure, and not to eat when he wasn’t hungry, even when he felt weak from fasting, he should not overeat at night. Though we are not on the high level of Rabbi Yosef Caro, or of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi who didn’t take enjoyment from this world at all, we can act like them during some of the meals that we resolve not to eat, or during a part of the meals themselves, especially during the weeks of Shovavim.

YESHIVA STUDENTS ALSO!

My father and teacher, shlita (HaRav Mordechai Eliahu), says that students of Torah also should participate in the tikun of Shovavim, whether by fasting from eating or from speech, along with the congregation, or by reciting Tehillim, even by interrupting their studies, because the recital of Tehillim is like Torah study, noting that the evil inclination seeks to entice Torah scholars more than anyone else.

However if the Rosh Yeshiva does not allow students to leave the yeshiva to participate in a fast from speech with the congregation, the student should take it upon himself to undertake the fast from speech in the yeshiva where he is learning Torah. He should not speak about things unrelated to his Torah study from sunrise till nightfall. This is especially important to unmarried students because the evil inclination seeks dominion over them. Nonetheless, married students also need to be strengthened in holiness, both over the misdeeds of their youth, and errors of the present, and the future.

HOW MANY FASTS?

Some people fast by eating less than usual, while others fast completely. Some people undertake one fast during the six weeks, while others fast on each Monday and Thursday, the weekdays when the Torah is read. Still others fast for forty consecutive days, excepting Shabbat, eating at night and fasting during the day. For people who cannot fast forty consecutive days, some authorities say eighty non-consecutive days is effective, while others say sixty-eight. Still others fast three days straight, both in the day and night without eating. This is equal to forty consecutive daytime fasts. Others fast day and night the whole week excluding Shabbat. Some do this for the entire Shovavim period.

My father and teacher told about several ordinary people he knew who fasted the whole week long. People came to them to receive a blessing and the blessing came to pass. On the other hand, I was present when several people came to ask my father whether to undertake weeklong fasts during the Shovavim. He told them not to – perhaps because they came and asked.

NOT TO VOW

Whoever takes it upon himself to fast in whatever fashion during Shovavim should begin by saying “blee nader,” meaning he is not accepting the fast as a vow, which involves a permanent commitment (and punishments if broken). Rather, he should say that if he so desires to fast, he will. If he chooses not to fast, he should recite Tehillim or give tzedakah (charity) in its place. If a person doesn’t do this (specifying that it is not a vow by saying “blee nader”), and fasts once or twice, this becomes a vow even though he did not say explicitly, “Behold, this is like a vow.” It is good to recite the “Hatarat Nedarim,” the cancellation of vows, but be careful in his regret not to include the mitzvot that he performed in the past, so that they will not be canceled as well.

“TAANIT DEBOR” – A FAST FROM SPEAKING

Part of leaving the impurity of Egyptian culture was departing from the culture of immoral speech. It is not accidental that Pharaoh’s name (in Hebrew) means evil mouth (pe rah). This includes heretical talk like denying G-d’s power and Kingship, and speaking falsehood, and arrogant speech, all of which Pharaoh was guilty.

For a long time in Egypt, the Jews failed to pray. Moshe himself was heavy of speech, a symbol that speech was in exile. With their redemption from Egypt, their speech was redeemed as well. The Jews cried out from severe bondage. The Arizal reveals that Pesach means “pe sach” – the mouth that speaks. After leaving Egypt, Moshe began to speak freely also. In Egypt, it was difficult for the Jews to pray – when they left they were able to sing, as at the crossing of the sea.

Shovavim is a favorable time to rectify transgressions involving speech: lashon hara, tale bearing, falsehood, flattery, broken and vain oaths, cursing, and embarrassing others. Holy speech should be increased during this period, including added prayer, Torah study, and the recital of Psalms.

The Arizal advises to say the Amidah blessing “Tekah b’shofar gadol” with the special intention that in addition to the actual ingathering of the exiles, the scattered holy souls exiled through sexual transgression be gathered and returned to their spiritual source. The principle rectification is Torah learning, prayer, and giving tzedakah, each person according to his capability. Especially important is studying the Oral Torah, to derive the halachah from the surrounding discussions, and in this way raise up the sparks of holiness from the husks of the “kelipot” where they have fallen, in the secret of the verse “his strength was swallowed and spit out” (Job, 20:15). Learning Torah for its own sake is a powerful rectification also.

The "taanit debor" was established by Rabbi Yitzhak Alafiah, of blessed memory. Unlike a regular fast, one is not physically weakened, and someone who guards his speech is rewarded with the hidden light reserved for the saintly. Therefore it is proper that everyone undertake at least one "taanit debor" during this period. One can also go without speaking for an hour or two at different times during Shovavim. A full day fast from speaking is praiseworthy. Once during each of the six weeks is even better. Some adopt the practice on every Monday and Thursday of the period. At my father and teacher's synagogue (Rabbi Mordechai Eliahu) the "taanit debor" is conducted congregationally on Shabbat.

RULES FOR A "TAANIT DEBOR";

The fast of speaking should be from sunrise to nightfall. One is allowed to eat. One is also allowed to speak about holy matters. Most often, the fast is conducted with the congregation, but it is possible to conduct such a fast privately. If the fast is done with the congregation, it is best to eat together also, so as not to waste time traveling home to eat, with the likelihood of speaking about non holy matters, such as politics, everyday business, shopping needs for the house, and the like, even if they are important. One is not to wish others shalom, nor respond to their greetings. To avoid slighting others, it is possible to prepare a note saying, "Sorry, I am on a taanit debor."

When conducting a "taanit debor," Rabbi Alifiah would not speak at all, outside of reading Tehillim. It is good to read the entire Book of Psalms three times during the day. A little with kavanah (concentrated intention) is better than a lot without absorbing the words. If a person is reading the Tehillim with the congregation in the synagogue, and he is unable to maintain their pace, if they finish the Book of Psalms three times, it is considered that he did so also.

If the "taanit debor" will cause anguish to one's wife, or diminish the pleasure of Shabbat, one should not do it. However, since profane speech is not permitted on Shabbat, a "taanit debor" on Shabbat is a very exalted thing.