

Yom Kippur Yizkor, Frontiers

- The Chafetz Chaim, One Step at a Time

FRONTIERS: YOM KIPPUR YIZKOR

Rosh Hashana is the holiday demanding Teshuva, return to God. What is a Baal Teshuva?

We think the Baal Teshuva is constantly involved with the improvement of his own personality, with becoming more faithful to God and more honorable toward fellow human beings. When we hear the word, we picture a person who has revolutionized their entire personality. But if that were so, then teshuva would successfully speak to perhaps one or two in thousands. Yet Judaism has a message for all of us and speaks to each and every one of us. teshuva applies to everyone, even to the vast majority of us who cannot all at once revolutionize our personalities.

The great Hafetz Chayim taught this lesson when he said:

“Consider our prayers. When we pray, we must face the land of Israel. When we are in Israel, we must face the city of Jerusalem. When we are in Jerusalem, we must face the place where the Holy Temple stood. When in the Holy Temple, we face the Holy of Holies. That is the way the law is formulated, in the Talmud and in the Code of Jewish Law.”

And the Hafetz Hayim asked:

“Why is the law thus formulated? Why not say directly, ‘Wherever a man stands, anywhere in the world, he must pray facing the site of the Holy of Holies in Jerusalem?’”

The Hafetz Hayim answered his own question, saying that:

“When a man travels towards a goal, he must go one step at a time. Just so when a man reaches up towards an ideal, he can only ascend one step at a time. That lesson is taught by the way that this rule is formulated. “When outside of Israel, pray toward the Holy Land. In Israel, face Jerusalem. In Jerusalem, face the Holy Temple. In the Temple face the Holy of Holies. One step at a time.”

On this day when each of us is judged before the Almighty, what should be our thoughts? How shall we resolve to improve our lives and life styles, which after all is the essence of teshuva? According to the Hafetz Chayim, only one step at a time; always only the very next step at a time.

There is another dimension to this thought. Rabbi Samuel David Luzzatto, the great ethical philosopher of our people and author of Mesilat Yesharim, “The Path of the Righteous”, wrote that every man has a personal frontier of Judaism. His crisis of faith lies in the observance of only one particular commandment that at that moment is on his frontier of Judaism. On that frontier, and in connection with only that Mitzvah, he is fighting his yetzer hara. For in every man there is an impulse to do wrong, the yetzer hara, and an impulse to do good, the yetzer

hatov.

Supposing, for instance, a man has just eaten meat, but craves a cup of coffee. But he is a creature of habit, and he can't have coffee without milk. And he wonders whether to succumb to temptation, and just this once have milk with his coffee after meat.

Now should he give in, after a while this violation becomes routine for him, and that habit, once formed, is no longer a crisis in his religious life. The yetzer hara, the powers of temptation, have taken over that territory. The next crisis for him might be non-kosher meat! Finally, it might be pork. Thus he slips a little at a time.

Supposing, on the other hand, he conquers his inclination and refuses to have that cup of coffee. He is then on the way to form a habit of a higher standard of kashrut; to form a new frontier, closer to observance. The next frontier might be for him the donning of Tefilin and Morning Prayer, or Sabbath observances, or higher ethical practices in his business. So the good impulse, the yetzer hatov, has won a bit more ground. "We are", said Luzatto, "constantly fighting on the frontier of our inclination of our impulses, our yetzer. And the yetzer tov and yetzer hara are in a constant struggle over only one mitzvah, whichever happens to be on the individual's frontier of observance. These frontiers are constantly moving. It is our task to make them move up to a higher standard of observance; to make sure that the yetzer tov wins, and not the other way around."

Another example: the mother and father who decide that dating a non-Jewish girl if the boy is 15 or 16 isn't so bad since he won't get married before he is 25 or 30? That permission at 15 or 16 has moved a boundary, and that movement has increased the probability of ultimate intermarriage many-fold, for these boundaries are never static; they go up or down. Avera goreret avera, mitzvah goreret mitzvah.

Now this lesson applies to our communities as well! The community also has its challenges, its own frontiers of Judaism that keep moving. The challenge is to move them up, not down, towards better observance and more Jewish loyalty, not away from it. And any movement is likely to create immense ripple effects, for good or for bad, depending on the direction.

There once was a movement that wanted to do no more than remove the Bima from the middle of the Synagogue and replace it further forward in the Synagogue. From that beginning they went on to institute a mixed choir, then seating changes, then basic changes in the ritual and the prayers, then rejection of the binding nature of halakhah, and finally produced the liberal Judaism movement that you recognize today. This was not a philosophy and practice that happened all at once, but rather a result of a series of movements of time honored boundaries.

One can multiply the examples: A laxity towards the needs of Jewish education, can produce ignorant laity, which produces non observant laity, and Shabbat goes, and Kashrut, and finally you find many living a life style that has no relationship, or indeed loyalty to Judaism.

Consider the group that claims Homosexuality is an uncontrollable urge, and therefore must be tolerated. That is only a beginning, but the final result is a Gay and Lesbian Synagogue holding

Yom Kippur Services presided over by their so-called Rabbi, and she sees nothing incongruous about a Lesbian who claims to be a Rabbi!

The process continues. *Avera goreret avera*. And on the other hand, you know of many communities that come ever closer to the Torah's standards of behavior, some even going far beyond the minimum required.

For just as a person and a community can, step by step, destroy Judaism, so they can step by step recreate it, save it, and themselves with it.

When Jacob dreamed of heaven, he saw a ladder with angels ascending and descending. Why a ladder? Because a ladder's rungs ascend step by step. The lesson is apparent. Even only one step at a time, you can eventually reach even heaven itself!

Our sages declare that Human beings are not, were never meant to be angels! The Torah is meant for humans, mortal, failing, unsure. It is for the imperfect. Judaism doesn't demand perfection. It demands effort. It demands movement. And above all, it shows us the direction that movement ought to take. Guard the boundaries. Do more. Step towards them and cross to within them. It is the only measure of safety we have today.

When we received the Torah on Sinai, we heard the voice of God Himself. Scripture teaches, "Moses spoke, and God answered with a voice".

Whereupon the Midrash asks a strange question: "How was that voice of God heard by all of Israel?" And the Midrash answers significantly; "Kal echad lefi kocho;" "Each person heard that voice, according to his own power; according to his own spiritual capacity did he hear the voice of God!"

This is the message of Mount Sinai, of Luzatto, of the Hafetz Chaim and of Yizkor at this moment to every Jew in the world: "Listen with your own voice; strive upward, according to your own spiritual capacity. Take only one step – one step at a time. And keep going!"

The great Rabbi of Kotzke, was once gathered with his disciples at the conclusion of the Sabbath. They had eaten of the traditional Third Sabbath meal, Seudah Shlishit. They had sung the songs of Sabbath. Now they were waiting for the Master to teach them a Torah lesson. For a long while, the Rabbi was sunk in deep thought. Then he lifted his head and asked a question: "My sons – tell me, where is God?" The disciples were shocked. "Rabbi what do you mean? Is it not written, 'The angels tell one another, His glory fills the universe?'" The Rabbi shook his head and said: "No, my sons. That is the answer of the angels. For mortal man the answer is different. For we are not angels. For mortal man the answer is, that the presence of God is where He is permitted to enter!"

We are all mortal men and women. For us, God is with us if we open our hearts to Him and the way to do this is step by step. And in each step we take, we will find God's blessing. May the Lord be with you, every step of your way, throughout the coming year.

