

## Kingston Liberal Synagogue

27 September 2020

### Repentance is a Process

'When there was a cholera pandemic in 1848, Rabbi Israel Salanter posted announcements in all the synagogues of Vilna on the eve of Yom Kippur, urging the people not to fast on that holy and awesome day, and to cut short the recitation of the liturgical poems of the day, and to go walking in the fresh air. After the Morning Prayer on Yom Kippur he took a roll in his hand and stood on the pulpit and after making the blessing ending, "*who creates various kinds of food*", ate the roll before the eyes of the entire congregation, that the people might see him and follow his example; for much is permitted where there is mortal danger, and the life of a single person was dearer in his eyes than all the wealth of the world'<sup>1</sup>.

Rabbi Israel Salanter is mostly known for his revival of the Musar movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a traditional Jewish path of spiritual development that leads to awareness, wisdom and transformation. However, Israel Salanter was also a leading figure in the Lithuanian Jewish community, and his life has been carefully recorded as a way to inspire others to follow his example.

In this anecdote, Rabbi Salanter makes a very strong statement about the purpose of religious life, which is similar to the decisions we have made this year. There are circumstances where the letter of the Law supersedes its thorough application. One can easily imagine Rabbi Salanter in his study, reading the news of the epidemic, assessing the consequences, and trying to weigh his duty of care for his community with his observance of Jewish practice. '*The life of a single person was dearer in his eyes than all the wealth of the world*'. It must have been a hard decision to tell people to go walking in the fresh air instead of attending services, and to eat a roll on the bimah in front of the whole congregation. His action spoke louder than all the words that are uttered on Yom Kippur, and he taught them an invaluable lesson about religion in the service of life.

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<sup>1</sup> In: *Days of Awe. A Treasury of Jewish Wisdom for Reflection, Repentance, and Renewal on the High Holy Days*, ed. By S. Agnon, Schocken Editions: New York, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., 1995, pp. 199-200.

Religion is the service of life when it gives us spiritual nourishment.

Religion is the service of life when we feel rejuvenated, renewed, and ready for the next leg of our journey.

Religion is the service of life when it emphasizes the process more than the final outcome. The Mishnah says, *“lo aleykha ha-m'lakhah ligmor, v'lo ata ben chorin le'hivattel mimenah”* - you are not expected to complete the task, neither are you free to avoid it. (Rabbi Tarfon, Pirkei Avot 2: 21).

*Teshuvah*, repentance, is precisely one of these processes happening on Yom Kippur. It is the foundational practice of this season of the year, and it is the process of assessing and turning away from our past behaviour when we have missed the mark. It requires a series of steps that Moses Maimonides has explained in his *Mishneh Torah*, a code of Jewish law, which he compiled between 1170 and 1180. One of the parts is called *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, the Laws of Teshuva.

- First, one must “leave the sin” and resolve to stop committing it.
- Then, one must regret sincerely, be embarrassed and ashamed by it.
- Then comes the confession before God: owning the sin and promising never to do it again.
- And finally, one must accept it for the future and resolve to live a better life.

The proof-text that Maimonides uses in his Laws of Teshuvah to explain the process of repentance is from the fifth chapter of the Book of Numbers:

*“When a man or woman commits any wrong toward a fellow human being, thus breaking faith with the Eternal, and that person realizes his or her guilt, they shall confess the wrong that they have done”*. (v. 6 – 7). Maimonides adds, *“this confession is a confession of words”*. (H.T. 1: 1) He stresses that the internal commitments to mend our ways must ultimately be expressed publicly, with words, and not kept inside.

Centuries later, another prominent Jew, Sigmund Freud, emphasized the power of words in what he called the *‘talking cure’*. Words were not simply used to establish a diagnosis, but they are the cure itself. The process of talking things out enables the discovery of narratives, emotions and anger that explain one’s behaviour. They also allow the patient to create a coherent narrative,

reconnecting with the past, explaining the present, and allowing a better future to happen. The *'talking cure'* is indeed a transformational and redemptive process.

The Yom Kippur liturgy, with its thousands of words, is a great tool that has gone through the test of time. The very fact we are still using it, even if we change the words and the expressions here and there, is a credit to its worth. Sometime, these words become a sort of background noise. We may be hungry, our attention may have slipped somewhere else, and in this very moment, something transformative happens, our own words, our own story takes over. Our words are superimposed on the words of the liturgy, and the process starts. We think of the past. We begin to ask ourselves the fundamental questions, *"what do I really want in life? What are the things that really matter to me? What am I proud of, and what would I rather leave behind"*?

No one else but you can do this. Sometimes we are in the right state of mind to engage in this process, and sometimes we don't. As the Mishnah says, *"you are not expected to complete the task"*!

The Talmud teaches, *"Before God created the world, God created the process of Teshuvah"* (Pes. 54a). In other words, *Teshuvah* is part of the fabric of the Creation. It is much more than a mere feeling of guilt that needs either to be suppressed or supposedly sorted by some magic incantations. It is a creative process by which we continually create and reimagine ourselves.

Instead of feeling overwhelmed by the long list of wrongdoings that dot our liturgy, let us feel elated by the opportunities that this process open to us.

*Ken Yehi Ratzon,*  
May it be God's Will, Amen

*G'mar chatimah Tovah*

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