



A TRIBUTE TO Rav Steinsaltz

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz zt"l (1937–2020) was a teacher, philosopher, social critic and prolific author.

Rabbi Steinsaltz was the first person since the medieval sage Rashi to have completed a full translation of and commentary on the Babylonian Talmud, and of the Tanach. He has been hailed by Time Magazine as

a once-in-a-millennium scholar – beyond translating the Talmud he has made it more accessible to more Jews than ever before.

Born in Jerusalem in 1937 to secular parents, Rabbi Steinsaltz studied physics and chemistry at the Hebrew University. He established several experimental schools and, at the age of 24, became Israel's youngest school principal.

Continuing his work as a teacher and spiritual mentor, Rabbi Steinsaltz established a network of schools and educational institutions in Israel and the former Soviet Union.

Israeli President, Reuven Rivlin, called Rabbi Steinsaltz a “modern-day Rashi” and a “man of great spiritual courage, deep knowledge and profound thought who brought the Talmud to Am Yisrael in clear and accessible Hebrew and English.”

Rabbi Meni Even-Israel, Rabbi Steinsaltz's son, recalls how on the Yamim Noraim, although it took Rav Steinsaltz more than 25 minutes to recite the silent Amidah, he nevertheless insisted that his congregation not wait for him before beginning the chazan's repetition: “My father thought about the klal – the whole. He did not feel as though he was more important than everyone else and should make everyone wait for him. He didn't want to turn people off and upset the community.”

Rabbi Steinsaltz passed away in August 2020. He will forever be remembered as a giant in the Jewish world. ■

The Unique Duality of Shabbat Teshuva

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz זצ"ל

The basic meaning of the Hebrew word שָׁבַת is standstill, cessation. G-d “worked” on the six days of Creation, and when שָׁבַת arrived, He stopped working. But שָׁבַת has an additional meaning, which is found also in Rabbinic literature: return. This meaning does not contradict the idea of cessation but rather complements it.

Before Creation, it was as if the Almighty had nothing to do with the universe. In fact, Creation does not pertain to the order of things that existed before it. In this sense, Shabbat is a return to the primordial state. It can be said that Shabbat is the seventh day upon which all of Creation is perfected. Yet at the same time, it is also a return to the pre-Creation state. Every Shabbat is therefore both the Shabbat after Creation and the Shabbat that preceded it.

These two elements also exist in *teshuva*. On the one hand, the first step of *teshuva* is to cease our transgressions and then detach ourselves from our sins. But *teshuva* also means “return,” a return to the state of things prior to sinning. In daily life, it is so much easier to stop doing something than to restore things to their former state. So too in *teshuva*. It is easier to cut and stop a sequence of actions than to return to the innocence that preceded the sin. Yet the prayer and the heartfelt desire that accompany every act of *teshuva* is to effect a change of action, a total uprooting of one’s evil deeds and a return to purity. (We seek to at least uproot the evil from our hearts because certain actions are irreversible.) This aspect of *teshuva*, a return to purity, underlies the Rabbinic saying (Midrash Tehillim 90) that *teshuva* preceded

Creation. This is why *teshuva* contains this pull towards the pre-Creation state.

These two aspects of Shabbat, cessation and *teshuva*, are found in the Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, *Shabbat Shuva*, or *Teshuva*. It is a unique combination of the essences of both Shabbat and *teshuva*, which together create a new entity. On the one hand, it is the only Shabbat in the year when one can engage in *teshuva*. On the other, it is the only time in which *teshuva* can be done in a Shabbat-like manner.

On Shabbat, we are commanded both to cease working and to turn the Shabbat into a day of pleasure (see Isaiah 58:13). But the experience of *teshuva* – born out of thoughts, memories and heart-rending compunctions – is usually not very pleasurable. In fact, this is precisely why we do not deal with *teshuva* nor confess our sins on Shabbat. However important they may be, *teshuva* and confession mar our *Oneg Shabbat*. On *Shabbat Teshuva*, we are therefore called upon to enact a Shabbat-like *teshuva* – namely, a *teshuva* that does not touch upon the painful or difficult sides of sin. Instead, we focus on building ourselves from within. We can restructure ourselves – not by forgetting the facts of our sins, but by erasing the experience of sin from within us.

This point is fully expressed in a verse we repeat both in the selichot and on Yom Kippur: “I have blotted out your sins like a thick mist and your transgressions like a cloud; return to Me, for I have redeemed you” (Isaiah 44:22). Even after doing *teshuva*, we still retain a certain amount of memory throughout the year, as it says: “my sin is ever before me” (Psalms 51:5). But during the Ten Days of Repentance – and especially

on *Shabbat Teshuva* and Yom Kippur – *teshuva* emerges as a renewed ascent whereby sin is erased, and we reach a higher state. Indeed, our Sages teach us that a person who does *teshuva* out of love merits to have his deliberate sins transformed. They are not simply lessened to the level of inadvertently committed errors; they are turned into actual merits (Yoma 86b).

The *teshuva* of Shabbat is a *teshuva* of love. We return to the Almighty not as people fleeing from their past but as individuals transcending the past. Like all the preparatory work we do to honor the Shabbat, *tikkun* (repair) is hard, demanding work. But, like this work, it is also what eventually makes *Oneg Shabbat* possible, and as soon as Shabbat comes in, we forget all our toil. Or, if we do not actually forget the toil, the pleasure of the Shabbat makes it taste a lot sweeter.

The pleasure of *Shabbat Teshuva* – despite all our sins and transgressions – stems from our adhesion to the aspect of *teshuva* imprinted in the very essence of Creation, which has nothing to do with sin. This *teshuva*, which preceded Creation, has nothing to do with reverting back from sin. It is an ascent that makes us see our failures as tests. Instead of thinking about all we have impaired and blemished, this *teshuva* leads us to focus on the ways in which we will be able to build our future in a loftier way. Even if we are unable to regain our pristine innocence, *Shabbat Teshuva* reconnects us with the *teshuva* that preceded the world. *Shabbat Teshuva* helps turn our complex weekday life, with all its pains and inner struggles, into a new creation: holiness. ■