

Rabbi Dr. Yosef Bronstein



## A Teshuva of Togetherness

“How can we unite in this separation?” These words from “*Keter Melucha*,” Ishay Ribo’s corona-related song, express one of the key challenges of the past few months. We live in a time of separation and divisiveness. Whether we are currently in a state of a full lockdown or the new normal of social distancing, physical separation between people has been one of the defining features of the corona pandemic. This has often hurt our sense of belonging to a broader family, social circle, or community. In addition, this medically-mandated physical distancing has unfortunately been accompanied by an uptick in tribalism, fractured societies and demonizations of the other.

Surprisingly, according to Rav Kook, one key method for achieving unity in a time of divisiveness is proper and sincere *teshuva*. In Orot HaTeshuva (12:4), he writes: “Every sin, even the most trivial of sins, instills in a person a feeling of hatred towards something, and through *teshuva* the love returns to shine.”

This assertion is surprising. Granted, interpersonal sins can poison a social environment. But there are private sins between man and G-d which do not involve other people. How can missing a prayer or eating milk and meat instill hatred in one’s heart for other people? And how can repentance restore feelings of love?

The answer requires a better understanding of Rav Kook’s broad conceptualization of repentance. In Orot HaTeshuva, he describes that a person

can only engage in proper repentance after understanding several kabbalistic assertions regarding the cosmos.

The first principle is that G-d imprinted a sense of positive dynamism and movement into the world. Nothing is stable. The entire world is “constantly developing” (Ibid. 5:3). Societies rise and fall, only to have better and more just societies arise in their wake (Ibid. 4:3). With the passage of time, biological organisms evolve to become better adapted to their environments (Shemonah Kevatzim 1:485). And from a spiritual perspective, every entity, in its own way, naturally strives towards greater and greater heights in the form of a closer connection to G-d (Orot HaTeshuva 4:2).

A second, interrelated point is that this joint movement towards perfection generates a sense of togetherness between all parts of creation. “The entire world is filled with harmony,” declared Rav Kook, since “the strong moral calling” to constantly grow closer to G-d emanates from “the united voice of each part of the cosmos” (Ibid. 8:7). Each individual soul hears this unified calling and naturally takes its place in this cosmic movement towards greater spiritual heights.

For Rav Kook, this picture sets the stage to understand the devastation of sin. In addition to contaminating the person, sin “causes distress to the heart since it contradicts the unity that exists between the individual person and all of existence” (Ibid. 8:3). All of creation is harmoniously

working together to connect with G-d while the sinner severs himself from this joint mission. This leaves the sinner in the unnatural and confusing state of detachment and aloneness.

This explains why sin, even those between man and G-d, instills hatred of the other within the heart. Sin causes an abnormal separation from the rest of the cosmos which leads to an unhealthy growth of one’s individual ego. This ultimately breeds hatred and divisiveness.

Repentance is not only a personal return to G-d but also a return to feeling reunited with the rest of creation. Through *teshuva*, a person regains his natural place in the harmonious symphony of the cosmos. In fact, Rav Kook writes that to do *teshuva*, one must view “the world as a whole, and every particular creation, the history of humanity and each individual person... as a single book of different chapters” (Ibid. 4:4). Only after realizing the interconnectedness of all aspects of creation can the light of *teshuva* shine within the individual person.

We enter this High Holiday season in a world brimming with separation and divisiveness. Our personal *teshuva* must be intimately bound with a deep connection to others. In this way, we can fix not only ourselves but also foster a sense of harmony amongst all of G-d’s creations.

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