

Teshuvah and the Significance of the Sukkah



Rabbi Shalom Hammer

The Talmud records Rabbi Yehuda's description of true *teshuvah*: "[If someone sinned in an illicit relationship] the person would have to situate himself with the same woman, at the same time and in the same place [as he was during the original sin] and abstain from sinning again" (Yoma 86b).

Rabbi Yehuda's suggestion is strange. Why is it necessary for the penitent to be tested by a situation he has already failed?

Rabbi Yehonatan Eybeshitz explains that sin affects the transgressor and also contaminates the place where the transgression occurred. The residual effects of the sin linger there and entice others to transgress the same prohibition as well. For example, the Rabbis explain that *tzara'at*, leprosy, is the usual punishment for speaking *lashon hara*, and just as it afflicts the speaker's body, it also affects his house.

With regards to *nig'ei batim*, the forms of *tzara'at* that afflict the speaker's house, the prophet declares, "For a stone will cry out from the wall and a sliver will answer it from the beams" (Chabakuk 2:11). The "stone will cry out from the wall" because of the impurity of the sin which has infected the wall itself, causing the wall to desperately find a way to rid itself of its state of impurity.

The *baal teshuvah* must return to the exact place under the same circumstances where he first sinned, thereby cleansing both himself as well as his surroundings. In recognition of his

concerted efforts, Hashem assists him in overcoming his inclinations which serves to defuse the effects of the sin. This helps explain the opinion of Rabbi Abbahu in Tractate Berachot that "the place occupied by repentant sinners cannot be attained even by the completely righteous."

The *tzaddik* is not necessarily immersed in the process of *teshuvah*. Therefore, he does not receive the assistance Hashem usually provides for penitents, and as such, he can be subjected to the residual effects of sin. The *baal teshuvah*, however, is immersed in the *teshuvah* process, thereby receiving assistance from Hashem and protection from the effects of sin. For this reason, Rabbi Abbahu concludes that a *baal teshuvah* is on a higher spiritual plane than the *tzaddik*. Repentance effectively cleanses and purifies the sinner as well as the area which was infected with sin.

The Ten Days of Repentance are a time that accentuates *teshuvah*. Sukkot follows the High Holy Days, demonstrating that *teshuvah* is a process that begins with an individual person but which ultimately impacts his surroundings. We may have succeeded in atoning for the sins that have affected our connection with Hashem during the High Holy Days, but we are still responsible for cleansing our surroundings from the effects of our sins. Therefore, after we complete our atonement on Yom Kippur, we leave our "*tzara'at*-afflicted" homes and their impurity and move into the *sukkah*,

which is insusceptible to impurity and is permeated by the Divine Presence.

This is why the Sages described one's required mode of dwelling as *teishvu k'ein taduru* - "dwell in the *sukkah* as you would in your own houses," especially with regards to sleeping, a time when our defenses are down and we are more susceptible to the temptations of sin. When we sleep in the *sukkah*, we demonstrate our interest in cleansing ourselves and elevating our surroundings, proving that we are worthy of Divine assistance.

Once we have transformed our souls during the Yamim Noraim and purified our houses over the seven days of Sukkot, we can return to our homes refreshed and recharged and ready to begin a new year in the service of Hashem.



Rabbi Shalom Hammer is an IDF educator and Founder and Director of Makom Meshutaf educational programming, under the auspices of World Mizrahi. He has authored five books. www.rabbihammer.com

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