

BERESHITH
"IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

Vol. XXIII No. 1
Tishei 5770/September 2009



בראשית

HARLOTS, RABBIS AND TESHUVA

Rabbi Hyim Shafner

At this time of the year, the season of the High Holidays, Jews the world over focus on *teshuva*, meaning return or repentance. *Teshuva* is not an easy process, nor is it one that is easily understood. It means far more than just promising to do better. It means striving sincerely to improve one's self.

The proper motivation for *teshuva* is a matter of a discussion throughout rabbinic literature. Two of the most interesting Talmudic stories that relate to *teshuva* actually involve prostitutes, and are quite interesting to compare in order to yield deeper insights into our own efforts at *teshuva* at this time of the year.

Story #1 (Babylonian Talmud, *Minachot* 44a)

A certain man (a student), although he had great difficulty controlling his sexual desires, was always very careful about the commandment of *tzizit* (wearing fringes on the four corners of his garment). One time, he heard about a certain harlot in a far away town by the sea and made an appointment with her, by sending ahead her required payment of four hundred gold coins. When he came to her door, the *(cont. on p. 2)*



REUNITING WITH OUR SOULS

Shmuel Robbins

I always loathed High Holiday time. A time to sit. And then to stand. And sit. A time to fight to maintain a straight face as our comically operatic choir wrestled with the high notes. A time to go to "la-la-land" for upwards of 3 hours at a time. Mostly, though, this was a time to satisfy my mother's need to attend a synagogue on the High Holidays.

My mother grew up with an observant grandfather, and some of her earliest memories as a little girl are of sitting on her grandfather's lap in synagogue on Rosh Hashana. She tells me nowadays, that mostly what she remembers are the spittoons in the aisles. Evidently, there was something else indelible imprinted upon her, something a little more sentimental, because she appeared to be attempting to recreate something every year. To her mind, she likely was trying to recapture the comfortable *(cont. on p. 3)*

PSYCHIATRY, CHOICES AND THE HIGH HOLIDAYS

Dr. Charles Kuttner

In the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses states that he is setting before the Jewish people a blessing and a curse. It's a choice. Sounds like a no-brainer, doesn't it? Do the right thing and good things happen. Do the wrong thing and bad things happen. Seems easy enough...

In addition psychiatry, a major concept is the conflict between the emotional part of the brain, the more inside, primitive area we can describe as the "reptile brain," that works for what feels good, and the thinking brain, the outside, more developed one. The thinking part of the brain, particularly the frontal lobes, helps plan out for the future. The reptile brain goes for the pleasure. These two can battle on an equal basis, but in some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, the reptile is the stronger contender.

Perhaps what psychiatry is describing is *(cont. on p. 4)*

HARLOTS (cont. from p. 1)...harlot's maid announced, "The man who sent you four hundred gold coins is here and is waiting at the door." The harlot replied, "Let him come in."

She prepared for him seven beds, six of silver and one of gold; and between one bed and the other there were steps of silver, but the last were of gold. She then went up to the top bed and lay down upon it naked. He went up after her filled with desire, when all of a sudden the four fringes (*tzitzit*) of his garment struck him across the face; whereupon he slid off the bed and sat upon the ground. The harlot sat down on the ground next to him and said, "I will not leave you alone until you tell me what blemish you saw in me."

"Never have I seen a woman as beautiful as you; but there is one commandment which God has commanded us, called *tzitzit*, and with regard to it the expression 'I am the Lord your God' is written twice, signifying, 'I am He who will exact punishment in the future' and 'I am He who will give reward in the future.' The *tzitzit* appeared to me as four witnesses," the man explained.

The woman, overwhelmed by what he had told her, said, "I will not leave you until you tell me your name, the name of your town, your teacher and the school in which you study Torah." He wrote all this down, handed it to her and left. Thereupon she arose and divided her estate into three parts; one third for the government, one third to be distributed among the poor, and one third she took with her in her hand; the mattresses, however, she retained. She then came to the *Bet Hamidrash* (house of study) of Rabbi Chiyya, and said to him, "Master, teach me so that I may convert."

"My daughter," he replied; "perhaps you have set your eyes on one of my students?" She thereupon took out the paper and handed it to him and explained what had happened. "Go," he said, "and enjoy your acquisition."

Those very mattresses that she had spread for the student for an illicit purpose she was able to spread out for him lawfully as his wife.

Story #2 (Babylonian Talmud, *Avodah Zara* 17a)

It was said of Elazar ben Dordia that there was no harlot in the world with whom he did not have relations. Once, upon hearing that there was a certain harlot in one of the towns by the sea who accepted a purse of gold coins for her hire, he took a purse of gold coins and crossed seven rivers to reach her. As he was with her, she passed gas and said, "As this gas will not return to its place, so will Elazar ben Dordia never be received in repentance."

Horrified, Elazar fled and sat weeping between two mountains and exclaimed: "O, mountains, plead for mercy for me!" The mountains replied: "How shall we pray for you? We stand in need of it [mercy] ourselves, for it is said, 'For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed!'"

Elazar then pleaded with heaven and earth and the sun, moon and stars, but they all gave the same answer.

Said Elazar, "Then it depends upon me alone!" Placing his head between his knees, he wept aloud until he died. Then a voice from heaven was heard proclaiming: "Rabbi Elazar ben Dordia is destined for life in the world to come!" When Rabbi Judah the Prince heard this story he wept and said: "One person may acquire eternal life after many years, and another person in but an hour!"

Questions and Explanation

In the first story the man does *teshuva*, lives and even merits marrying the harlot. In the second story, however, Rabbi Elazar ben Dordia does *teshuva* and dies. Why?

I would suggest that the difference is in the differing attitude and motivations of the two men with regard to *teshuva*. The first man repents due to his appreciation for mitzvot and for holiness. He is able to weigh the infinite value of the spirit (reminded by his *tzitzit*) against the fleeting pleasure of the physical. His approach is balanced and allows him to bring to the fore the parts of himself that are of value and can be used for holiness. This man had the potential to elevate the physical by connecting to the spiritual, and indeed in the end of the story he truly accomplishes this, as the Talmud points out, by marrying the harlot and transforming the mattresses that were illicit into those of a mitzvah.

In the second story, in contrast, Rabbi Elazar ben Dordia is only moved to *teshuva* when the physical becomes repulsive, only when the harlot, the object of his desire, passes gas, and is thus suddenly stripped of her sensuality and the curtain of his idealization of her is lifted. He does not have the spiritual tools with which to raise the physical and sanctify it. His obsession and desire are gone, and he is left alone and empty.

From these two contrasting stories, we can better understand different types of motivation for *teshuva*.

Teshuva can come from feeling empty and lost, but this *teshuva* does not usually sanctify one's life. Rather such *teshuva* often functions by jettisoning one's current identity and replacing it with a different life. In contrast, one can add holiness to the life one already leads and let the mitzvot sanctify and improve who we already are, not expunge our pre-existing selves. This second type of *teshuva*, in my opinion, is more organic, since it does not demand the severance from one's original self, but the sanctification and tweaking thereof.

Much blessing for a New Year and for repentance that does not reject who we are, but rather serves as a "return," a "*teshuva*," to the Godly people that we truly are. *Shana Tovah*.

Hyim Shafner, MSW, is the Rabbi of Bais Abraham Congregation in St. Louis, MO. Prior to Bais Abraham he was the Rabbi of the St. Louis Hillel at Washington University and the Rabbi of India. He is the author of the Everything Jewish Wedding Book 2nd ed.

REUNITING (cont. from p. 1)...feeling of familial closeness that she associated with the season. I, however, thought there was something deeper there, and always wondered what her holiday drive was all about.

In my early twenties, I traveled in South Asia, mostly India, for about a year. I did so in a backward fashion, attending a yeshiva in Israel for a few months and then deciding to hit the road. In my teens and throughout college, I had become increasingly traditional in my Jewish outlook, keeping kosher style, wearing a yarmulke, and putting my *tallit* (prayer shawl) over my head at synagogue (which probably looked absolutely ridiculous). Due to my background and the order of my trip, I arrived in Asia with heightened religious sensibilities. I had been instructed before I plunged into the journey to be particularly strict about three practices on the road: tefillin every day, Kiddush on Friday night, and saying Shema twice a day. South Asia is teeming with thousands of Israelis. They constitute such a high percentage of travelers, travel in groups and have such distinct character traits that the locals are under the impression that Israel must be at least as large as the US, if not bigger. If not, where could they all come from? Every Friday I would announce to any Israelis who were around, "Tonight at 7:00 pm, I will be making Kiddush in my hotel room. Anyone who wants to hear, can come." Two Israelis would tell four, who would tell eight, and I would end up with 35 strangers in my hotel room every week. My Hebrew was awful, and I'm sure they were duly unimpressed, but they were always thrilled to be there. Wondering why, I asked some. They would all tell me that "it reminded them of home."

A couple of months into my adventure, I decided on a whim to go up to the Annapurna mountains of Nepal, second only to the Himalayas in terms of breathtaking size and grandeur. I eventually took up with a group of Israelis, and we moved up the mountain together. Two of them were traditional Sephardim who loved talking about anything Jewish. The third was virulently anti-religious. We argued in the morning, on the trail, and at night. He couldn't understand why any balanced person would want to have anything to do with anything Jewish--he argued that Judaism was a virtual death sentence that revolved around blind faith and was a patriarchal mode of behavioral control.

Incredibly enough, when I announced that I would be making Kiddush that Friday evening at 7:00 pm, he loudly and aggressively insisted that he be the one to recite the Kiddush for the group. He wouldn't say why.

Imagine the scene. We were standing in a place surrounded by snow-capped mountains that literally rose 10 thousand feet vertically out of the ground. The setting sun illuminated the sparse cloud cover, creating spectacular

purples, pinks, and yellows. The place was immersed in singular dramatic beauty. The appointed time arrived, and this proud *chiloni* (secularist), this spouter of Nietzsche and Kirkegaard, let forth with a powerful blast of *chazanoot* (cantorial flair), "YOM HASHISHI!" and with deliberate flair belted out an emotional and wonderful Kiddush. There was not a dry eye in the group. My friend looked at me with fire in his eyes and stated simply, "My grandfather made Kiddush, my father makes Kiddush, and I make Kiddush!"

How could anyone put that kind of intensity into something done by rote and for the sake of mere tradition? At that moment, there on that mountain, I came to strongly believe that all Jewish *neshamot* (souls) want to come home, and have a magnetic attraction toward the things that nourish them. It's not just feeling a fleeting touch of happier days gone by, certainly not a grasp at familial comfort and safety. A Jewish *neshama* has an enormous drive to connect with spiritual things, and nearly every Jew regardless of educational level, religious level, etc., participates, at some time or another, in some form of some Jewish activity, even if it's only sitting through another year's Rosh Hashana service (even when they can't remember why they came in the first place).

If so, it behooves us to honor the desire of our "better half." Let's remember why we really came to synagogue for yet another year. We are there to reunite the *neshama*, with which we've been entrusted, with what nourishes the soul and makes it happy. Personally, in years where my Hebrew was weak, my grasp of the concepts found in the prayers was tenuous and my interest was oscillating, framing the experience that way helped me to embrace it much more enthusiastically. And conversely, I found that the more enthusiastic I was, the richer the experience became.

Shmuel Robbins hunts rhinoceroses and wrestles alligators in his Botswanian backyard, while relaxing in between WWE cage matches. His wife and two children periodically remind him that he is in fact a real estate accountant in Milwaukee, WI.

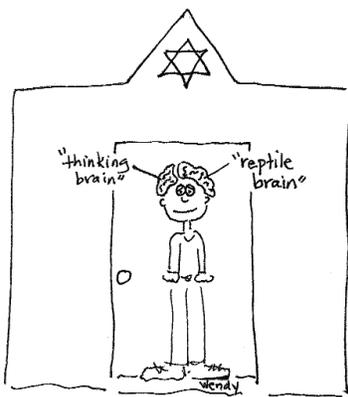


PSYCHIATRY (cont. from p. 1)...the ongoing relationship between the *neshama* (soul), which represents one's spiritual nature, versus the *goof* (body), which represents one's physical nature. Humankind is the only creature that was created with aspects of both the spiritual world and the physical world. (God formed Adam's body from the earth and then breathed life into it.)

Does one's *neshama* reside in a particular part of the brain? To say so would be to view the battle between the physical and the spiritual in far too simplistic a manner. Indeed, we know the understanding we have gained through psychiatry and neurology, that there is far more to the brain than the "reptile brain" versus the "thinking brain."

Certain areas of the thinking brain are activated when we're deep in prayer or meditation. I describe these areas to my patients as the organ by which we connect to G-d. Spirituality has less to do with the pleasure-seeking reptilian brain, and more to do with getting some coordination to and strengthening of our thinking brain.

Early in the evolution of psychoanalysis, Freud described the human psyche as subject to basic animal drives. Viktor



Frankl set forth a new concept, that perhaps our strongest drive is to have meaning in our lives. Keeping that in perspective, we realize that we're not always free to choose the most pleasurable alternative, rather the most meaningful. To quote Frankl, "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."

By the very structure of the days, the High Holidays of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are incredible opportunities to strengthen the

"thinking brain," to feed our *neshamot*. Praying, which is central to the High Holidays, allows us ample time to think, and to direct our thoughts toward how to achieve a meaningful life. And it is about choice. Every year, during Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, Jews of all walks of life are given the opportunity to evaluate where they are heading and whether their lives are being directed by their "thinking brain" or their "reptile brain"--and from that knowledge, to make a choice: a blessing or a curse.

Charles Kuttner, MD, works as a psychiatrist, was raised very Reform and is now Orthodox. He is married, lives in Portland, OR, and has two grown children and is captivated by his two granddaughters.

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