

Next Year Will Be Different

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The summer is quickly fading away. Days are getting shorter, nights are a lot cooler and the leaves have begun their beautiful transformation. Indeed, it's that time of year again – the “head” of the year is around the corner.

On Rosh HaShanah, not only is our annual income predetermined, but our very lives hang in the balance. We say in the stirring prayer *U'Netaneh Tokef*: “On Rosh Hashanah will be inscribed and on Yom Kippur will be sealed – how many will pass from the earth and how many will be created, who will live and who will die...”

We conclude, “However, repentance, prayer and charity remove the evil of the decree!”

Yes, we do have the power to influence the head or foundation of the year for the better, through our own actions and

charity. This opportunity sounds so obvious that one would think that only a knucklehead wouldn't take advantage. But let me tell you a familiar story. There was once a Rabbi who was reviewing the areas of his personality that needed some fixing. Incidentally, he came across his notes from the previous Rosh HaShanah. To his horror, the items on his new list matched his year-old list to a "T."

Year after year we make resolutions, invest our energy and our good wishes, and are still stuck on the same old stuff. Truthfully, we all strongly desire to do *teshuvah* (return to God), but we just can't seem to mend our ways.

Rebbe Nachman teaches that the key to *teshuvah* is to hear one's own shame and remain silent (*Likutey Moharan* I, 6). There are many ways to experience this embarrassment or humiliation. Often it involves people sharing their cynical comments or poking fun at us. However, there is a much deeper shame that is experienced, regardless of whether it was brought on by others or by ourselves. This is the shame that we experience when we internalize our own failures. Nothing destroys us more than when we realize we haven't reached our dreams and goals, we haven't accomplished what we so sincerely set out to do. If there's a reason we're stuck, it's because we have honestly tried but eventually experienced setbacks, and so we let our *teshuvah* efforts pass from our mind.

Rebbe Nachman is teaching us to remain silent – not to answer back to the inner voice of failure. The shame we experience is a stark reminder that we are seeking to serve God and not ourselves. We will not judge our success according to the human outcome, but rather, we will be joyful because of our deep, inner desire for Godliness. Seeing our own shortcomings and yet remaining silent and determined to continue trying is the best antidote to our greatest enemy – our ego.

The Hebrew word Rebbe Nachman uses for silence is *yidOM*. This word has additional meaning, as King David says, "Be *DOM*

before God, hope longingly for Him” (Psalms 37:7). Our silence need not be a silence of shame and failure, but of hope and longing to God. When we acknowledge our weak points, yet live with the incredible words of encouragement Rebbe Nachman gives us, we finally gain the inner-strength and fortitude necessary to make real changes.

Many people devalue their *teshuvah* because they think it's incomplete and they haven't yet become perfect. But *teshuvah* is about continually striving for God's honor and kingship, despite life's guaranteed ups and downs. If our Rabbis teach us that the World to Come can be achieved by doing *teshuvah* a moment before one's passing, certainly someone who engages in *teshuvah* his whole life is abundantly more worthy. The more *teshuvah* we do, the better, even if we aren't perfect.

As we stand before the King this Rosh HaShanah, may we merit to say to Him that this year will indeed be better. Amen!

(Based on Likutey Halakhot, Shabbat 7)